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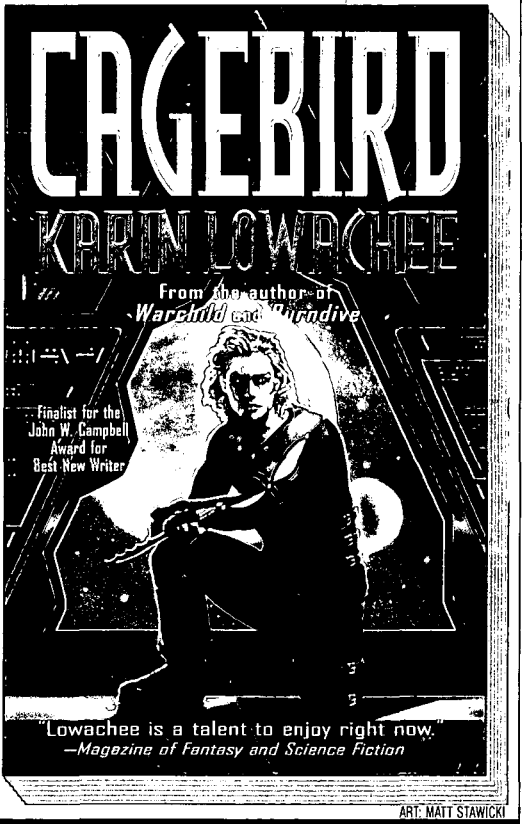
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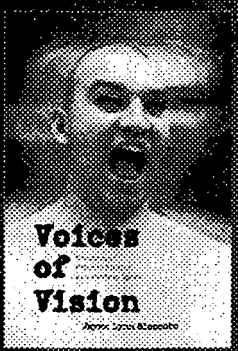

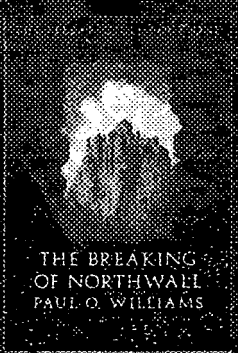

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NOVELLAS

THE IMAGO SEQUENCE 61 **Laird Barron**

NOVELETS

I.D.I.D 131 **Robert Thurston**

SHORT STORIES

THE GREAT CARUSO 6 **Steven Popkes**

THE GOLEMS OF DETROIT 37 **Alex Irvine**

BORN-AGAIN 48 **K. D. Wentworth**

THE NEW DEITY 119 **Robert Reed**

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS TO LOOK FOR 24 **Charles de Lint**

BOOKS 29 **Elizabeth Hand**

PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS: MOODY'S ANGELS 115 **Paul Di Filippo**

FILMS: KOREAN FUTURES 125 **Lucius Shepard**

COMING ATTRACTIONS 160

CURIOSITIES 162 **Steven Utley**

CARTOONS: Arthur Masear (36), S. Harris (47), J.P. Rini (130).
COVER BY CORY AND CATSKA ENCH FOR "THE IMAGO SEQUENCE"

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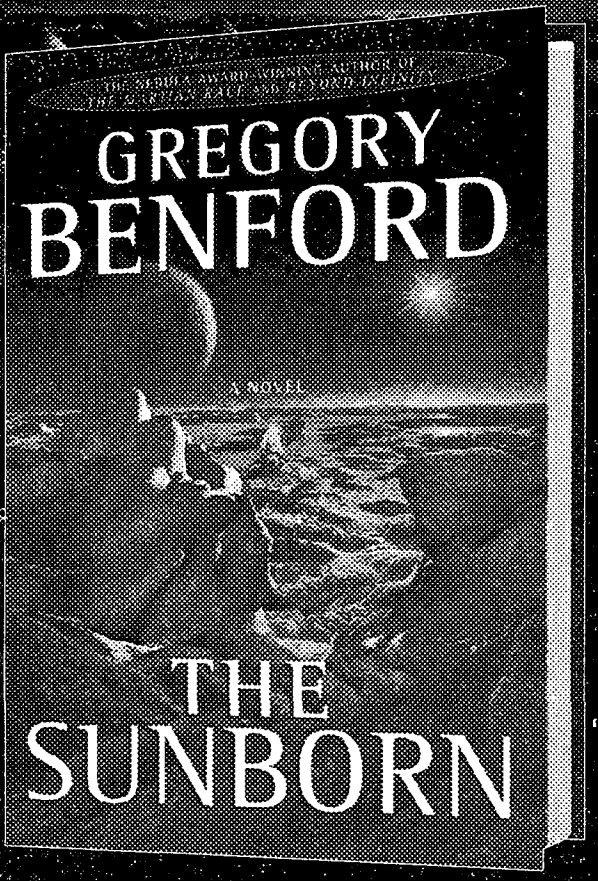
NEW FROM ASPECT

FROM THE NEBULA AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *THE MARTIAN RACE* AND *BEYOND INFINITY*



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A few years ago, there was a spate of novels from independent presses that focused on the future of cigarette smoking. They bore titles like Smoke Easy *and* The Last Cigarette *and seemed to reflect widespread vilification of the tobacco industry.*

Now we're in 2005 and here we have a story with a different perspective on the future of cigarette smoking. Those of you who remember M. Shayne Bell's story "Anomalous Structures of My Dreams" from a couple of years ago might begin to wonder if there's a theme anthology in the offing—if there is, we'll leave it to anthologists Jack Dann and Gardner Dozois to come up with a book title that takes our breath away.

The Great Caruso

By Steven Popkes

NORMA GAVE UP SMOKING when she found out she was pregnant with Lenny. Everybody congratulated her and said how important it was not to smoke when you were pregnant. It was bad for the baby. Norma understood and promised herself she'd start the day he was born. But, heck. He looked so small and wrinkly in the preemie ward of the Albuquerque Hospital and was trying so hard to just to breathe and stay alive, she decided she'd give him a couple of years. Get him past nursing and stuff. Once he was strong enough, she'd go back. Tomas didn't approve of smoke inhalation. Nothing that didn't go up the nose was a good idea. He was ecstatic that she stayed off tobacco. Or, he would have been if he hadn't been shot down the week before she found out she was pregnant. He was fronting for the Turban-Kings but had developed a deep affection for their brand of cocaine. Tomas had been pretty but Norma had always known he wouldn't last long.

With Tomas gone, Norma had to get a job. She sighed and hit the streets. She would have had to find one anyway. After six weeks of

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fruitless searching, Norma landed a job as a clerk for Frost Fabrications near the University.

She contented her lapsed habit by lingering in the cigarette fumes from the Indians selling turquoise brooches and rings at the corner of Old Town. She could often be found standing in front of the cantina down the street next to an old Mexican smoking a gloriously obnoxious cigar. With the occasional secondhand smoke from disgruntled office workers grabbing a quick one on the loading dock, Norma managed to keep herself on the low end of satisfied. Just a couple of years, she told herself. Then, she'd light up and everything would be fine.

But when Lenny turned five, a whole series of commercials about how secondhand smoke caused learning disabilities were broadcast. Norma was pretty sure that once she started back again she wouldn't be able to keep from smoking in the house. She grimly decided she could stick it out until Lenny got into the habit of studying.

Norma was fifty when Lenny turned ten: the danger years, said the magazines. When anybody could suddenly drop dead of a heart attack. Cigarettes caused heart attacks, didn't they? She didn't want Lenny to have to bury her, did she? Not a ten-year-old boy.

By the time Lenny was thirty and had been on the Albuquerque police force for a while, Norma figured she'd done enough. If she died, she died. She was seventy now. It was now Lenny's duty to bury her. He'd do it eventually one way or the other. Her first puff was everything she'd remembered: the burn down the throat, the tingling all the way to her fingers and toes, the quick, sharp rush up into her face and behind her eyes. She felt brighter and happier than she'd been in years. It was like the first time she lit up, way back when she was thirteen and living in Portales. And, just like when she was thirteen, after a minute or two she turned green and threw up. Oh, well, she thought philosophically. You pay for your pleasures.

In no time at all she was back up to a couple of packs a day.

Lenny, of course, was appalled.

He came over to her house and tried to talk over the music. There was always music in Norma's house: blues, country, classical, rock. If she could sing it, she had it on. Not that Norma could sing. Her voice had been

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described as having all the subtlety and color of a downtown bus at rush hour. Norma didn't care.

First Lenny tried desperately to talk her out of it. "Come on, Ma," he pleaded. "It's been years. You're over seventy. Don't throw it away now." Then, he got belligerent and refused to let her come over to his house to see her grandkids. That lasted a week. They lived down the street in the same sort of four-room bungalow she did. If she couldn't go over there, they came over here. Once pleading and threats didn't work, he tried covert operations. He broke into her house after duty and threw away every pack of cigarettes he could find.

This last trick might have worked. Cigarettes were eleven dollars a pack now and she was still at the same job after thirty years. What she needed was a way to smoke cigarettes without having them in the house. Or, better, cigarettes cheap enough she could afford to lose a few packs a month as the cost of doing business.

The Internet, she discovered, holds the answer to all things.

Reginald Cigarettes, a tiny company based in the Sandwich Islands (which used to be Hawaii until they seceded) sold cigarettes by direct mail. This had many advantages. First, she gave them the address of a packing services company nearby — that way Lenny couldn't take them out of the mailbox before she could get to them. Second, they were cheaper since they were being sold from another country (no taxes!). Third, they were also artificial. When she was finally found out and cornered, she could use the site's propaganda about how much better they were than real cigarettes.

Not that Norma cared. She figured she could empty a few packs of Reginalds and stuff them with Marlboros.

But when the Reginalds came, she found she liked them. True, they didn't taste quite as good as Marlboros. But the tingle was better and, as had to happen eventually, when Lenny found out about them and she showed him the pack —

"See?" she cried shrilly. "See? They're better for me."

"Ma," protested Lenny. He looked at the pack. "They still got tobacco in them."

"But look at the numbers on the side. They're *way* better than Marlboros."

Lenny sighed. By that, Norma knew she had won.

She had her cigarettes. All was right with the world.

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* * *

Five years later, she got up with her usual morning cough. She rolled out of bed and padded downstairs to put on the coffee. While she waited for it to perk, she put on the morning classics station. It was opera week, which she loved, and they were working their way through some ancient recordings of Enrico Caruso — The Great Caruso, as her mother had said when she was a girl. Still coughing, Norma hacked around the house for a while. Well, she certainly *coughed* like the Great Caruso. While she waited for the really deep one that signaled the start of the day, she thought about renting that old film about him, the one starring Mario Lanza.

Something stuck in her throat. Something that wouldn't come out. Panicky, she went to the sink to get a drink of water, but the spasms in her chest nearly knocked her off her feet. It was all she could to hold on and stand upright. Whatever it was, it clawed its way up her throat and she spat it out into the sink, bloody and covered in mucous.

It was perhaps a quarter of an inch across and twice that in length. She reached down and picked it up. It was spongy and felt surprisingly firm. Norma rinsed it off.

She guessed this was it, then. Just like Lenny had always told her. Lung cancer. Not that she hadn't expected it eventually. Only not so soon. She sighed. You pay for your pleasures.

The radio dimmed a little and Norma reached over and turned it up, still looking at the bit of diseased flesh that had come from inside her.

It vibrated in her hand.

Curious, Norma put her ear to it. Faintly, but unmistakably, it was singing along with Caruso on the radio.

Doing a pretty good job, too.

The doctor had no explanation. They sat in his office as he went over the test results. Norma was dying for a smoke.

Hm. She thought to herself. That was pretty good. She giggled.

Dr. Peabody looked up at her and frowned so Norma stifled herself. This was clearly no laughing matter. She'd laugh later. When she had a cigarette.

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"Mrs. Carstairs — "

"Miss."

"Beg pardon?"

"I've never married. Miss will do."

Dr. Peabody nodded. "The truth is I'm not sure what's in your...lungs. Something's in there. Something's up your trachea and into your larynx. We'll have to run more tests. Do you smoke?"

"Sure do. Two packs a day of Reginalds."

"I see."

Norma could see the effort Dr. Peabody made not to look disgusted.

"Tests." She picked up her purse. "You might want this, then." Norma brought an envelope out of her purse and put it on his desk. It looked a little dry so Norma got up and wet a paper towel and moistened the little thing. Even with the water, it was still dead.

"This is...?"

She put it in his hand and shrugged. "I have no idea. But that's what I got inside me. Coughed it up yesterday. Thought it might help."

Dr. Peabody didn't answer. He was staring at the fleshy bit in his hand.

DR. PEABODY ASKED her to come back the following week. When she did, he wasn't alone. There were at least three other doctors there for moral support. The medical consensus was, apparently, that she had lung cancer of a rare if not unknown type. She should be admitted at once. In his office, Norma stared at the radiographs as if she were interested. Then she smiled at them sweetly and asked if she could go to the bathroom. They nodded, all together as if they were attached to the same string.

Outside the office, Norma walked down the hall and out through the parking garage. She went home and sat at her kitchen table, drinking a glass of wine and smoking one of her Reginalds.

Dr. Peabody called Lenny, of course. Before the afternoon was finished, Lenny was pounding on her door.

"What do you want, Lenny?" she asked from the other side.

"For Christ's sake, Mom. You *know* what I want. I want you to go to the doctor."

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She sipped her wine — the bottle was mostly gone now, dissolved into Norma's healthy glow.

"I don't want to."

"What kind of answer is that? You want to die? Peabody said you got a good chance if you get some treatment now."

She shook her head. Remembered Lenny couldn't see her and said, "No."

"Are you drunk, Mom?"

"No!" she said defensively.

"You shouldn't be drinking at your age."

"I had a deprived childhood and now I'm making up for it."

"Come on, Mom! You got to go."

Norma leaned her head against the door. "No," she said clearly and quietly. "No, I don't."

"Mom!"

"This is my choice," she shouted back at him. "It's my lungs. They were my cigarettes. If I can't choose whether or not to die, what choice *do* I have?"

"Look. If you want to go all Christian Scientist on me, let's call up the Mother Church and ask *them*. They'll tell you to get your ass up to the hospital."

"That's no way to talk to your Mother."

"This is no kind of conversation to have through a door."

"Why not?" She knocked on the wood. "It's a perfectly good door."

He was silent for a minute. She could almost see him rubbing his forehead. "Let me come in."

She shook her head again. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Norma left him shouting at the door and walked unsteadily upstairs to bed. You should always have a good, hard bed, Norma reasoned. That way when you get too drunk to stand, you won't roll off.

She couldn't keep Lenny out of her house forever. She didn't even want to. Norma was proud of her son, shy and thin when he was young, now so strong and tall. She always did have a thing for a man in a uniform. That was what had attracted her to Tomas in the first place. The Turban-Kings had uniforms of a sort.

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Lenny wanted a good, reasoned argument why she wouldn't go in for treatment. Norma didn't have one. Just a strong feeling that this was the body she came in with; it ought to be the body she went out with.

But he was wearing her down.

A week after she'd left Dr. Peabody, she went to the 7-11 for her regular rations of bread and ice cream. She came home to see a young man sitting on her stoop, a briefcase next to him.

He stood up as she came near. He was odd looking — too thin, for one. His obviously expensive suit that had been cleverly cut to hide it but still, like light through a window, his thinness shone through. His cheekbones were apparent and were it not for the fullness of his lips and his large eyes, he might have looked gaunt. As it was, he had a haunted, shadowed look, like a monk who regretted his vow.

He stepped forward.

"Miss Carstairs?" he asked, holding out his hand.

"Yes," she said warily, stepping back.

"I'm Ben Cori." He dropped his hand to his side. "I'm Reginald Cigarettes."

She looked at him for a moment. Things clicked together in her mind. "This has something to do with my lung cancer."

He smiled at her. "It does."

"What's special about lung cancer if you're a smoker?"

"Can we talk inside?"

Norma shrugged. "Can't hurt me, I suppose."

Ben's hands were long and delicate and his wrists seemed lost in the sleeves of his jacket. Now that he was sitting at her table, Norma had a sudden respect for Ben's tailor. The suit fooled the eye so that he merely appeared to be thin. Ben was a bundle of sticks in a sack.

"So, are you a lawyer?"

Ben put down his coffee. "No. Just the engineer. Also, CEO, COO and CFO. President and Board of Directors. Salesman and website designer. I had to *hire* a lawyer."

She sat up. "I don't get it."

Ben leaned back in his chair. The chair didn't so much as creak under his weight. "I designed the tobacco product. It's made in a small factory down in Cuba. Then, the factory ships the resulting product to a cigarette

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packing company in North Carolina. From there, the packs go to a shipping company in New Jersey. The website is hosted by a company in South Africa and sends the orders to New Jersey. The U.S. Mail delivers it to you. Reginald is incorporated in Hawaii. The only part of Reginald that really exists is an office in my home in Saint Louis." Ben sipped his coffee.

"I see," said Norma. "You design cigarettes?"

"No," Ben said carefully. "Tobacco *product*. More precisely, I design small machines whose nature it is to take tobacco, tear it apart and rebuild it with reduced carcinogens and toxins. Dried tobacco leaves from all over the South come into the factory and something that resembles dried tobacco leaves come out of the factory. Tobacco product."

"What's that got to do with me?"

Ben opened his briefcase and brought out two radiographs. He carefully placed the first one in front of Norma. "That's your lungs."

"I've seen it. How did you get this?"

"I've been working the net for a while. You can find anything if you have enough time and money." He placed a second radiograph next to the first. "That's a normal case of lung cancer."

Next to each other, the differences were obvious. The normal lung cancer — if such a disease could actually be called normal — looked splotchy and irregular. Her lungs had something in them made up of lines and polygons.

Ben pointed to an irregular rectangle. "I'm pretty sure that's an amplifier. Next to it is a low pass filter. A pretty sophisticated filter from what I can tell. These circles are sensors of some kind."

Looking at the picture made her chest hurt. "What the hell have I got inside of me?"

"I don't know."

"Do you know how it happened?"

Ben nodded. "No. Whatever happened is impossible."

"Impossible?" She pointed at the pictures. "It's right there in front of me."

Ben nodded, smiled at her. "That it is."

"Pretty big stretch to be impossible."

"I know that."

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Norma stared at him for a minute. "Okay. Explain it to me."

Ben pulled some more papers from his briefcase. "In my business, mites, tiny machines about the size of a cell, do all the work. We got a bad shipment of mites. Somehow they went ahead and did all the work the normal mites did and left some clusters in the tobacco that got through all of the quality control mechanisms, the heating, the cutting and packaging, the irradiation, until the finished cigarettes reached you. Then, they suddenly started working inside of you, not in some random destructive manner but in a controlled construction. I can guess what might have happened but, in point of fact, it's impossible."

Norma spoke slowly. "I have tiny machines in my lungs? Machines you built?"

"Close. I don't know what they're encoded to do. Nobody knows."

"How many...clusters got out?"

"From what I can tell, only one."

"How do you know that?"

Ben spread his hands. "So far, you, and only you, have shown anything." He pointed at Norma.

"Pretty long odds."

"Not as long as some."

"So what are your mites doing to me?"

"I'm not sure. *My* mites were contaminated with other mites with different natures. Mites are built to cooperate so I'm not sure what they are doing."

"What were they *supposed* to do?" asked Norma.

"All different things. One set built musical instruments," said Ben, leaning on the table. "Oboes. Flutes. Tubas. Or, since they came from India, sitars or something. Some were designed to implement a communication system designed in Germany. There were banana preparation mites ordered from Malaysia. Others."

Norma remembered the singing of the fleshy bit.

"I have tiny machines making music in my lungs. *Your* tiny machines."

"As I said, they're not *my* mites. My mites died properly."

"Are you sure you're not a lawyer?"

"If I was a lawyer, I wouldn't be here."

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"Why are you here?"

He stared at his hands and didn't speak for a few seconds. "To be present at the creation."

"What does that mean?"

Ben leaned toward her. "By any stretch of the imagination, the mites should have just consumed you, made you into some intermediate random product. *My* mites, acting out of *my* programming, would try to make you into tobacco product. Something that, to you, would be invariably gruesome and fatal. But that's not what the mites inside of you are doing. They're building something inside you. Something *integrated* — which I can see from the pictures, as well as noticing that you're still walking around."

"Walking right down to the clinic so Dr. Peabody can cut them out."

"That's why I'm here. To try to persuade you not to."

Norma stared at him. "Are you nuts?"

Ben smiled. "Maybe. Mites and humans are made up of much the same things: carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, some metals. If we come from the dust of the earth, then so do they. But we created them. Now, something unexpected and impossible has happened. A miracle."

"A *miracle?*"

"Yes."

"That's like saying cancer is a miracle."

Ben shook his head. "Not at all. Cancer is the emergent property of the accumulated errors in an ordered system. It's the consequences of random events."

Norma shook her head. The way he talked made her dizzy. "How's this any different?"

"Cancer in a system makes the system untenable. It doesn't do anything to make the system any better. It's not creative. This is going to make you something better."

"It's going to kill me. That's what it's going to do."

Ben shrugged. "There's a risk to everything. But we come from the earth. So do these mites. The earth speaks through us. They speak through the mites, too." He pointed to the radiographs. "That low pass filter looks a lot like filters used to integrate circuits into nervé cells. *I* didn't design it. None of the programming in any of the contaminant

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mites had anything like it. They developed this on their own. This is no cancer."

"But like cancer it's going to kill me."

"You were going to let the cancer do that anyway, or you wouldn't have walked out of Peabody's office."

"That was different." Norma thought for a moment. "The cancer was mine. It was my own body telling me it was time to go. These things are...*invading* me."

"A cluster is made up of a few hundred mites. It's about the size of a mustard seed. It took root in you — not just anybody. It's making something in you — nobody else."

"You're saying these things *chose* me?"

"No. They can't choose anything. They're just little automatons. Like chromosomes or sperm. A baby is the emergent property of the genes but the genes didn't have any choice in the matter. Out of such automata comes you and me. The mites didn't choose you. The earth itself chose you."

"You *are* nuts. These things are still going to kill me."

"We can stack the odds." He brought out an inhaler from his briefcase. "This is FTV. All mites are designed so they stop operation when FTV is present. FTV saturates the air in mite factories as a safety precaution. If you inhale this, it might at least slow down their progress."

"That goes against your plan, doesn't it?"

"No. Think of it as prenatal care. It gives the mites an opportunity to more thoroughly understand their environment."

Norma thought of the singing again.

"What if they escape? I don't want to destroy the world or something."

Ben brought a square instrument out of his briefcase. "This has been sampling the air for the whole time I've been here. Look for yourself. No mites."

"They could be waiting. Like fungus spores."

"Now who's nuts?"

She considered. "Could Peabody cut them out?"

Ben shook his head. "I don't think so. The mites are cooperating. If you cut out a chunk of the network, they'll just try to rebuild it and they'll

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have to relearn what they lost plus figure out the new topology resulting from the surgery. I think it would just make things worse."

"That's what you would say regardless, isn't it?"

Ben shrugged again and said nothing.

She had been ready to just die and be gone. At least, this way would make it more of an adventure.

She drew a ragged breath. She had no difficulty breathing yet. No more than usual.

"Okay," she said. "I'm in."

LIFE SEEMED to settle back to normal. She didn't cough anything up anymore. Her voice cracked and quavered as she spoke. Which, she supposed, was a small price to pay for robots living in her lungs.

Reginald Cigarettes suddenly disappeared from the market. Ben had given Norma prior warning. She had a dozen cases packed carefully in the basement.

About a month after she'd first spoken with Ben, she woke up from a deep sleep jumpy and irritated. When Lenny came by for his morning visit she told him to go away. Her voice was breaking like a fifteen-year-old boy.

"Ma," called Lenny. "Let me in."

She opened the door a crack. "What do you want?"

"Come on, Ma. Don't get crazy on me. Let me in. I'm your son, remember?"

"I know who you are." She stood back to let him in.

"That was a pretty nice station you had on," he said as he stepped in. "Who was singing?"

"Oh, come on!" She held up her hands in exasperation. "You have something to say. It's written all over your face. What is it?"

"Well, Ma. Your birthday is coming up and all — " He stopped and held out an envelope to her. "Happy birthday."

She opened the envelope and slipped on her reading glasses. They were tickets to Opera Southwest. Two of them. To see *Don Giovanni.*

"You always have music around," Lenny said shyly. "I thought you might like to go."

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Norma didn't say anything for a moment. "Nearly forty years I've known you," she said and kissed him on the cheek. "And you can still surprise me."

All the next week, she sang along with everything that came over the radio, tuneless or not. Belted it out with Patsy Cline. Harmonized with a Hunk of Burnin' Love. She was a Werewolf in London Born in America seeing Paradise by the Dashboard Lights for the very first time.

Norma was so excited waiting for Lenny to pick her up she made herself pee three times. Just to be sure she wouldn't have to get up in the middle and go to the bathroom.

Lenny wore a tie for the occasion and looked so handsome that Norma decided she'd forgo cigarettes for the night. Just so he'd be happy. She left her pack of Reginalds in the dresser drawer just to make sure.

The drive downtown, the walk into the Hiland Theater, finding their seats in the middle just in front of the orchestra, passed in a happy, warm blur. She settled back in her chair when the lights dimmed and put one hand on Lenny's. The music came up.

I must have heard this a hundred times, she thought. But now, in front of her, sung by people no less flesh and blood than she, it came to life.

In the middle of the second act, where Elvira began her angry solo, Norma leaned forward. For a moment, she had an uncontrollable urge to cough. It subsided before she could do anything to stop it. Then, it came again. Stronger, this time. She was going have one of those hacking fits like when she coughed up the fleshy bit. She could feel it coming on. Norma had to get out of there.

She put one hand over her mouth, stood and walked quickly up the aisle. Lenny stared after her but she was outside in the lobby before he could react.

A bathroom. She couldn't find one. Instead, she walked outside onto Central Street, thinking to cough or throw up in the gutter.

When she filled her lungs, the pain eased and in her mind, she could still hear Elvira's rage, haunted by the Don and her own weakness. She opened her mouth, and it welled up and out of her like clear running water. The vibrating power of it shook her, made her heart pound and her lungs rejoice. Every day she had listened to the radio, the music had been captured and woven into her cells. Now, they were free.

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She stopped when Elvira stopped. Lenny was standing in front of her.

"Ma?" he asked. "You okay?"

Norma nodded. She didn't want to speak.

"That was good," he said softly. "Unnatural, of course. But good."

"You think so?"

"Yeah." He nodded. "I do." Lenny didn't say anything for a minute. "Tomorrow we go see Dr. Peabody."

"Hush." She was smiling. Norma felt like a girl again and the world was bright with possibility. She was sixteen, sitting in an old Chevy, smoking and grinning and driving down a road straight as a runway and smooth as a glass table.

In 1711, for his first opera in London, George Handel advertised he would bring to the stage a chariot pulled across the stage by live horses, fireworks, a raft of tenors sailing through the storm in midair and not one, but two fire-breathing dragons. Consequently, opera, even opera in Albuquerque, was no stranger to novelty.

Ben told Norma she had two advantages going into the audition. One, she was old. It was hard to take a pretty, thirty-year-old diva and make her look seventy-five. Not only was it easier to do the same thing to Norma, she didn't mind and the diva usually did. The second was she had the pipes. Once the director was persuaded to hear her, she had a spot.

Not to say she got the front line roles. She was the old dowager, the mother-in-law, the comic innkeeper's wife, the ancient fortuneteller—in short, any role that suited her age and wasn't big enough to make the younger singers want it. This was fine with Norma. She was having a ball.

Hey, she thought to herself as she sprayed the inhaler down her throat. Look at me. I'm the Great Caruso.

The next two years passed quickly. Norma expected her voice to have a metal, inhuman quality, given its origin. Instead, it was an intensely human voice. "A dark warm revelry," said one critic in Keystone. "Lustrous," said another in Scottsdale. That was as far as she traveled. Opera Southwest had funding problems those years and their concert tours went only as far east as Amarillo and as far west as Needles.

She didn't care. The music never palled. The singing never lost its

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luster. But one day, she was listening to a recording of Rigoletto as she prepared for the role of Maddalena — being able to read music didn't come with the deal — when she looked up in the mirror. She looked the same. But what was going on inside of her? The quality of her singing seemed to get better over the last two years. She never coughed anymore. The only reminders she had were the daily dose of the inhaler and the two radiographs she had framed and mounted on her wall.

Norma stared at her image in the mirror. She was pushing eighty and could see it in her face. "What's going on in there?"

I should have died two years ago. I'm living on borrowed time.

Norma had a feeling deep inside that the mites were only waiting for her.

"Waiting for me to do what?" she asked Ben as she sipped her coffee. It was a warm March and they had come to an outdoor coffee shop near the theater. It was her birthday.

"What do you mean?" Ben leaned back in his chair, bemused. He was still thin by normal standards but in the last few years, he had filled out. Now, his eyes seemed properly proportioned and his mouth fit in his face. "Aren't you happy?"

"Of course I am."

"Then don't question it."

Norma snorted and stirred her coffee. "This was the miracle you wanted to be present at?"

Ben smiled back at her serenely. "I'm present enough."

"These mites went through a lot of effort to do this to me. Why? What do they have in mind? Why did they stop?"

"The FTV stopped them."

"I don't believe it. I don't think the FTV was much more than a suggestion. I think they *chose* to stop. For some reason."

"You're making them more intelligent than they are." Ben closed his eyes in the spring sun.

"I'm not sure intelligence has anything to do with it." Norma drummed her fingers on the table. "You don't need intelligence to have a purpose. They had a purpose. What was the word you used? My singing was an...*emergent property* of their purpose."

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"What do you think it is?"

"How should I know? Send messages to the moon? A voyage to Arcturus? A better subway?" Norma mulled it over in her mind. "I owe them for this."

"You don't owe them a thing. Think of it as a reward for a life well spent."

Norma chuckled. She had a clockwork sense of time passing. It was her choice. They had made sure of it. Well, she was eighty now. When *should* she choose? Once the mind and gums went, there wouldn't be much left. Why not now, when she still had it?

"Heck," she muttered out loud. "I was ready to let lung cancer kill me. Why not these guys?"

Ben leaned forward, suddenly alert. "What are you talking about?"

Norma watched the way a bicyclist worked his way down the crowded street. "I quit using the inhaler."

"When?"

"Just now."

It didn't take long. The mites were ready. A month after she stopped using the inhaler she woke up in her bed, too weak to reach the phone. Lenny came by on his way to work to say hi and found her. The paramedics came into her room in slow motion. Their hands left trails in the air as they drifted over her; the instruments resting on her chest and face felt as light as down. It made her smile as she drifted off.

She awoke in the hospital, a mask on her face, a crucified Jesus across the room from her. Jesus appeared to be an understanding sort — as understanding, she supposed, as one could be hanging in the air from iron nails driven through wrists and feet.

Norma must have been wired. A moment after she awoke a nurse came in the room and started examining her. Ten minutes later Dr. Peabody entered the room.

Dr. Peabody looked as if he'd been waiting for years to tell her she needed his and only his procedures and therapies. Only his surgery would save her.

Norma pulled the mask off her face. "When can I go home?" she wheezed.

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Peabody stopped, his mouth open. It was worth the black spots in her vision to see his face. "Miss Carstairs — "

"Yes. I'm dying. I know. Prescribe a home health aide for me so I can get oxygen at home."

Peabody seemed to gasp for air.

"Is there anything else?" she asked sweetly.

Peabody fled.

Ben came in as Peabody left the room. "Let me guess. You didn't want to do what he said."

Norma nodded and lay back, spent. "Get me out of here. I'll die at home, thank you very much."

Lenny told her she was lucky. Norma's pneumonia wasn't difficult. The pain she expected from lung cancer never materialized. She was spared the emphysemic experience of drowning in her own fluids. There was only a deep and abiding weakness. The lifting of an arm or rolling over in bed became too much effort. Lucky? She thought so.

Lenny moved in. Ben visited daily. Every other day, a home health aide came in and helped bathe her and checked the oxygen.

Norma grew accustomed to the oxygen cannula. While it didn't alter the progress of things, it did make them pass more easily. She imagined the mites accepting the help as they worked.

"You said it was the earth," she said to Ben, smiling. "The earth speaking through me."

"I changed my mind. This is stupidity given substance," said Ben, exasperated. "It's not too late. We can use the FTV."

Lenny was behind him, an anguished look on his face. "Don't leave me, Mama," he said softly.

"Everything leaves," she said softly as she drifted off. "Me, too."

Norma drifted over a forest or factory. She couldn't quite tell. The world was in furious motion: great trees grew and intertwined with one another, their branches mingling without discernible boundaries. Roads melted into bushes melted into seas. The air was filled with the sound of labor: the percussion of hammers, whistling of saws, voices talking. Spider things were working everywhere but turned their faces up to her as

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she passed in what could only have been a smile, were they so equipped that a smile was possible.

A bench grew out of the earth. She floated down to it and rested.

It's all me, she thought, proud of herself. Every little spider, machine, and factory. All me.

Enrico Caruso sat down next to her. Not the heavy, ham-fisted Caruso of the old photographs. This was a more handsome and gentler looking, Mario Lanza-esque sort of Caruso.

She stared at him. "What? You're a ghost now?"

He laughed, a rich vanilla sound. "Hardly. Your brain cells are dying one by one. We thought this the least we could do." He waved his gentle hands toward the sea. "Nothing here reflects anything like reality, since you're making it up. But, since you're making it up, it's what you want to see."

"Ah," she said and smiled. The music resolved itself into Verdi's *Il Trovatore.* It seemed appropriate.

She had no desire to sing with it. At this moment, it was enough to listen. "Do you know what's happening in my room?"

Enrico thought for a moment. "I know what you know. You've lapsed into a coma. Lenny is telling Ben what you want done with your remains. Ben is resourceful so it will likely be done."

"We'll sing for them?"

"All across the net."

"Is that what you wanted?"

Enrico shrugged. "It's enough. How about you?"

She smiled into the evening sun. "It's enough."

The dusk was coming. She could see the ocean dim into a gauzy purple haze. Like sunset. Like night. Whatever imaginary vision she had possessed was fading.

The night darkened as she listened to the music of their work.

"You won't be here to see it, of course," Enrico said regretfully as night fell.

Norma took his hand in the darkness to reassure him. It was a warm, strong hand. She held on strongly and laughed. "Just you wait. You ain't seen nothing yet."

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Speaking in Tongues, by Neil Gaiman, Dreamhaven Books, 2004, 75min CD, $15.95.

Shoggoth's Old Peculiar, by Neil Gaiman, Dreamhaven Books, 2004, $12.

IT'S HARD keeping up with Neil Gaiman's output. Oh, the major releases from the New York publishers are no problem. They're released with all sorts of fanfare and reviews and you'd be hard pressed not to be aware of them. I'm talking about work that appears in more out-of-the-way venues, such as the pair of lovely items under discussion today.

Both feature previously published material, so the Gaiman completist will probably already have them — although not in these lovely editions, and in the case of the CD, not told in the author's voice. I say "told" because the three stories and two poems on the CD don't feel like they're being read to us. They're delivered in the best oral storytelling, as though we're sitting in a pub, or by a hearth, while the teller leans a little closer to relate the curious goings-on in his tale.

It's too bad that all authors don't have the gift of delivering their material in the exact voice one imagines they should have when reading their books. And it really is a gift. Because the voice is so close to the printed page — we don't need visuals to engage our imaginations for either. But the wrong voice throws everything off.

It's worse than the wrong visual, such as, say, the plump, bespeckled author reading first-person narratives of some barbarian warrior's adventure. In that case you can just close your eyes and if the voice is right, it still works.

But just as every vocalist can't be a world class singer, every writer can't deliver an audio version of

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their writing. I can think of only a handful, and Gaiman's right up there with the best of them.

It probably helps that the "character" in two of the stories ("The Price" and "The Facts in the Case of the Departure of Miss Finch") is Gaiman himself. Author, husband, father. He mixes the details of his real life (living in his old house outside of Minneapolis, going to London for a business meeting) with the implausible (devils and strange carnivals that take place in abandoned subway stations) so convincingly that the listener is almost prepared to take it all at face value.

It also helps that Gaiman's narrative voice on paper rings very closely to his speaking voice, carrying in it similar resonances of earnestness, irony and wit.

If you've never had the opportunity to hear him speak, this collection, and others available from the same publisher, are highly recommended to you.

I'm not quite as enamored of the incidental music that comes between the stories. It's not so much that it's bad, as that it takes me out of the frame of mind that the storytelling has put me into. I am quite taken, however, with Michael Zulli's art on the cover and inlay. Readers of Gaiman's Sandman series will recognize the name. Those who don't know his work already will undoubtedly go looking for more of his art after seeing the delicate watercolor and pencil examples presented here.

Voice plays an important part in the chapbook also under discussion here. A young Texan embarks on a walking tour of the British coast during the off-season and runs into some of the inhabitants of the original Innsmouth, a pair of charming miscreants who don't have much good to say about H. P. Lovecraft. But the gibes aren't mean-spirited.

Here it's not the main point-of-view narrator's voice that's so charming, as that of those two Innsmouth residents he meets in a pub called The Book of Dead Names. I found myself hearing the actors from the Goon Show, or even a touch of Monty Python, while reading their dialogue, so I wasn't surprised when Gaiman reveals in the afterward that they were in fact based on the British comedians Peter Cook and Dudley Moore.

Shoggoth's Old Peculiar is very funny — laugh out loud funny, in places — but it's to Gaiman's credit that it's not a complete farce. Somehow he manages to instill a touch of creepy dread to leaven all the humor.

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The chapbook features wonderful old pulp magazine-styled art from the pen of Jouni Koponen, and some of the proceeds from the sale of each copy are bound for the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund. So not only are you getting a wonderful package, by buying a copy, you're also contributing to a worthy cause.

Hawkes Harbor, by S. E. Hinton, Tor, 2004, $21.95.

I find it curious, the ingrained fallacies that play out as truths in the publishing field — even when the evidence is so strongly against them. Things like, short story collections don't sell. (Tell that to the above-mentioned Gaiman, or Harlan Ellison, just for starters.) Don't mix genres in the same book, like serious suspense and humor. (So *that's* why Dean Koontz's books never make the best seller lists.) Or the idea that an author proficient in one genre, or writing for a certain age group, won't be capable of successfully switching from one to another.

Of course, the publishing field is rife with authors who put lie to that last statement, everyone from Elmore Leonard (westerns and contemporary mysteries) to Jane Yolen (adult, YA and children's fiction). But I still saw a recent review of S. E. Hinton's new book (she was the author of YA classics such as *The Outsiders* and *Rumble Fish*) in which the reviewer wondered at great length why Hinton would think she could write an adult novel.

Well, I can answer that. It's because she can, and has, and that reviewer would have seen that if he'd been reading *Hawkes Harbor* for what it actually is, rather than being so determined to press his own agenda.

One argument he had that particularly annoyed me was how the fact that the book has a positive message proves that it's written for kids, not adults.

But I'm getting ahead of myself here.

Although allow me one more digression. Years ago there seemed to be so many Arthurian books coming out that, even though they'd long been a passion of mine, I got to the point where I simply refused to read any more. Then Parke Godwin's *Firelord* came out. I only read it because I'd long admired his work, but I did approach it with extreme trepidation. Happily, not only is it a strong and powerful novel in its own right, it also showed me that the most overused material

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can be made fresh again in the right hands.

These days it's vampires that have me running for cover. We have fat ones and funny ones, detective ones, terribly violent ones (in which the authors lovingly describe each gruesome detail), and pretty much any other kind you can think of. Frankly, they all wear me out. I'll still try the odd vampire novel from time to time, and occasionally they're amusing, or bemusing, but they're rarely fresh or interesting.

Until *Hawkes Harbor*.

Now what's particularly interesting about Hinton's novel isn't the vampire — or rather, she doesn't dwell on the vampire doing the usual sorts of things. It's about redemption. Of trying to right the wrongs one has done. And set against the horrific figure of the immortal Grenville is the human — although no less troubled — character of Jamie Sommers, a hard luck orphan who had to grow up tough and hard, and a little heartless, to survive.

Sommers arrives in Hawkes Harbor, and, while out fortune-hunting on a deserted hillside, has the bad luck to set Grenville free from his tomb. And so begins a confusing relationship of master and servant as both men seek to regain their humanity.

Hinton jumps around with the timeline in the narrative, writes beautifully, and has fascinating insights both into how we screw up our lives *and* how we can confront the disarray we make of them and perhaps forge something worthwhile out of how we address our misfortunes.

See, that's what the above-mentioned reviewer didn't like and thought was a message more suited for a YA book: the idea that even if we don't think we can do anything good with our lives, we can at least try.

But you know what? As adults, having had far more years to make a mess of things than teens, that's not such a bad message for us to hear.

The Spirit Catchers, by Kathleen Kudlinski, Watson-Guptill, 2004, $15.95.

This is a cool idea for a series aimed at YA readers, but if the other books are as well written and interesting as this one, I don't see why adult readers wouldn't enjoy them just as much. Especially those of us with any interest in the arts.

The series is called Art Encounters and is an introduction to the work of famous artists through the

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medium of historical fiction, giving "literary interpretation to great works of art." In other words, fictional characters interact with the artists in their own times, allowing us a glimpse into their working lives and the passions that drove them to create such lasting works.

Some of the artists to be covered in the series are Pablo Picasso, Frida Kahlo (I need to find that one), Jan van Eyck, and Paul Gauguin. The book in hand is the first to be published. Set during the Great Depression in New Mexico, it features the mysterious and cantankerous Georgia O'Keeffe.

Our viewpoint character is a young Texan named Parker Ray who, on the loss of his mother and little sister, has spent months walking across America to reach fabled California, where he hopes to find his father who went looking for work before the dust storms hit the home farm. When he reaches Ghost Ranch in New Mexico, and makes the mistake of stealing a camera from O'Keeffe, the story begins.

It turns out that stealing a five-dollar camera (which was a huge amount of money at the time) was maybe the best thing he could have done, because O'Keeffe ends up taking him under her wing. But working for her isn't an easy task, and then there are the spirits of the desert who keep intruding on the pragmatic young man's life.

Kudlinski does a fine job with the characters, but she particularly excels in exploring the joys and pains of creating art, and in detailing the landscape. I've been to that part of the Southwest (been to Ghost Ranch, actually) and it all came back to life for me as I was reading *The Spirit Catchers*. When she was in the desert, researching this book, I'm guessing that Kudlinski felt the spirits that always seem to inhabit such wild places because she certainly knows how to evoke the mystery of a desert night, and the lonely strangeness of wandering the dry arroyos and rugged hills.

I don't know if the other books in the series will contain a fantasy element, but this one could easily have been published in our field.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Books

ELIZABETH HAND

A Handbook of American Prayer, by Lucius Shepard, Thunder's Mouth Press, 2004, $22.

Tijuana Straits, by Kem Nunn, Scribner, 2004, $25.

There and Back Again: An Actor's Tale, by Sean Astin with Joe Layden, St. Martin's Press, 2004, $24.95.

The Devil in Design: The Krampus Postcards, written, edited, and designed by Monte Beauchamp, Fantagraphics Books, 2004, $18.95.

Seasons in Hell

AT THE HEEL of the past year I was vouchsafed a spiritual truth; or, rather, a revision of one:

Hell is not other people, as Jean-Paul Sartre observed in *No Exit*. Hell is other people in a Mexican border town.

Just in case *Touch of Evil* wasn't enough to convince you of this, three (relatively) recent novels bear it out — Nancy Farmer's brilliant and blackly visionary dystopia, *The House of the Scorpion* (2002), winner of a National Book Award and one of the bleakest YA science fiction novels ever written; Lucius Shepard's metaphysical romance, *A Handbook of American Prayer*; and Kem Nunn's nightmarish suspense novel *Tijuana Straits*. Farmer's book isn't new enough to warrant a review here, but it shares enough elements — in particular the Grand Guignol seediness, corruption, desperation, and just plain weirdness of the border culture — with the other two novels that it's worth mentioning *en passant*. *A Handbook of American Prayer* and *Tijuana Straits* share a great deal, as well; most explicitly, protagonists who are former convicts, basically decent if feckless men who've done their time and made shaky but considerable progress as upstanding (or

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usually standing; both have a tendency to knock back a few) members of American society. Each embodies the sentiment expressed by Wardlin Stuart, narrator of Shepard's novel — "We're all sociopaths to some extent, benign ones for the most part, capable of squeezing ourselves into whatever dress is required for success in a particular environment."

Wardlin has been sentenced to ten years for first degree manslaughter. Halfway through his term, he's knifed by another prisoner. His surgeon tells Wardlin it's a miracle he survived.

> This suggested the possibility that prayer itself was the miracle worker, that whatever name was attached to a prayer, be it Allah, or Jesus or Damballa, was less important than the intensity and particularity with which one prayed, and the moment one chose to offer up one's prayer. Thus prayer, perhaps even faith, might be seen as an immoderate act of physics, a functional means of effecting small changes in reality.

And so for the remainder of his sentence, Wardlin becomes a metaphysicist. He begins composing, then writing out prayers, for himself at first, and then for his fellow prisoners, who ask for the things prisoners desire, and pay in the currency prisoners possess.

The first prayer Wardlin writes on demand begins "The pig-nosed daughter of Genevieve Sharp hates me." It works. So do the other prayers that Wardlin composes, though he turns down most requests. He names his spiritual work-for-hire "prayerstyle." On the page it resembles not very good poetry —

> Oh, Lord of Lonelieness,
> drowning in candleflame,
> sitting with your cup of raw
> spirits
> at a back table in the Cantina
> de Flor Negra
> in Nada Concepción,
> spittle and mezcal dribblings
> beaded up on your mustache....

— but, as mentioned, it works. So much so that after praying for success and for a woman, Wardlin gathers his prayerstyle supplications into manuscript form and finds a publisher. He places a personals ad in a magazine and finds a woman, Therese, who owns a gift shop in the one-horse town of Pershing, Arizona. He and Therese

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are soulmates (hey, it's a novel!), despite enough realistic scrapping to keep their romance from soaring off to *Touched by an Angel* territory.

They marry. Wardlin's prison term ends. They move to Pershing. Which sounds like a great place to live — mildly eccentric natives, desert scenery, a great bar owned by a retired Vegas showgirl; all nicely, economically described by Shepard — until Wardlin's book, *A Handbook of American Prayer*, is published by a small press and, in the best tradition of warning us of the perils of overnight literary success, all hell breaks loose — because Wardlin's prayers have been answered.

The book becomes huge. The excerpts from Wardlin's prayerstyle missives are a little artsy-fartsy for my taste (but then I'm a heathen), and I had trouble believing that the highly desired Wal-Mart demographic would buy lines like "a wind troubles the brim of his hat/beneath which breeds a Swedenborgian magic."

But the titles are good: "Prayer for Lyle Gallant's Allstate Insurance," "Prayer for Elizabeth Elko's Divorce Action." Before you can say "Be careful what you wish for," *A Handbook of American Prayer* has inspired hundreds of websites and a genuine cult, the Wardlinites. Before you can say "Oprah's Choice," Wardlin is on the cover of *Time* and *Newsweek*. He's on *Larry King Live!* Sharon Stone's on the line! She wants to host a party for him!

Shepard has great fun with all this. It's to his considerable credit that Wardlin can undergo all this and remain both a believable protagonist and a believable son of a bitch — after all, he killed a man.

> "Don't," I said to Sue [his agent], who was looking reprovingly at me. "Don't fucking tell me not to fucking curse when Larry and me go fucking live. Okay?"

Jerry Falwell is supposed to be Wardlin's opponent on the Larry King show. When he bows out, Wardlin instead finds himself squaring off with the Reverend Monroe Treat, a preacher who favors lime-green briefs and, after declaring *A Handbook of American Prayer* to be Satan's Bible, ignites it on live TV, which of course has the immediate and customary effect of sending the book into multiple printings.

Up to this point, *A Handbook of American Prayer* has functioned as a very clever satire on the role of

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religion on contemporary American culture. So I had some misgivings at the reappearance of a character we met earlier: a sinister figure whom Wardlin first encountered in a bar just over the border in Nogales.

> "A diminutive, mustachioed man in a slouch hat, a black sport coat, black shirt, black jeans..."

I immediately had this guy pegged as Gaff, Edward James Olmos's character in *Blade Runner*; but Shepard didn't do me the courtesy of outfitting him with enigmatic origami animals, so I guess I was wrong. Wardlin, however, recognizes him almost immediately: he is the Lord of Loneliness himself, the demiurge to whom Wardlin, unwittingly, has been offering his prayers. Is he the genuine article, summoned into being by the supplications of millions of Americans? Is he a stalker, drawn by Wardlin's celebrity and promise of a particularly American form of consumerist salvation? Or is he Something, Someone, even more maleficent, interested in a far more ancient form of transaction with Wardlin Stuart?

Shepard plays the question of the dark man's identity like a masterful version of the shell game. Even by the novel's end it remains ambiguous, though there are sly hints, like the name the man uses when he tempts Wardlin in the desert — he calls himself Darren, Gaelic for "little great one," and another malevolent figure who later emerges is named Galen, "little bright one." Darren himself has some interesting and original ideas about Wardlin's own true nature — "Problem for avatars is, they attract a special class of predators."

The novel's climax comes during a hellacious trip to the suppurating underbelly of Nogales, where Wardlin's role as novice metaphysicist is finally put to the test; but not before Shepard has gotten off some great riffs on fundamentalists, the origins of religious belief, sex, and our current president.

> I contemplated the prospect that there would one day be a George W. Bush Presidential Library and decided it would be stocked with volumes such as *The Little Golden Book of Trees*.

A Handbook of American Prayer is lyrical, caustic, scary and funny by turns; one of Shepard's best novels, and that's saying something. I'm still not certain exactly where

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Darren falls into the book's metaphysical scheme. But I'm betting that if he were the sort of guy to leave origami figures at the scene of the crime, his trademark would have horns.

It has been fifteen years since Kem Nunn's debut novel, the punk noir *Tapping the Source*, a National Book Award finalist that's now considered a cult classic. The book is greatly admired by genre novelists, among them Lewis Shiner, Richard Grant, and myself; its vision of the broken-glass glare of Huntington Beach, California's surfing scene, circa 1988, ending in a Manson-era horrorshow, remains as potent today as when the book first appeared. *Tapping the Source* deservedly won great acclaim, garnering its author comparisons to Robert Stone and Graham Greene, names also invoked by critics praising Lucius Shepard, and fans of Shepard's work will no doubt enjoy Kem Nunn's books as well.

Nunn's second and third novels were less successful outings than his first. It wasn't until 1997's *The Dogs of Winter* that he returned to the winning formula of surf and suspense. His newest book, *Tijuana Straits*, invokes the same milieu, its plot impelled by a nearly unbearable sense of the boundlessness of human evil. Like Robert Stone's *Bay of Souls*, *Tijuana Straits* has a mythic subtext which raises it above the constraints of mere suspense to a sort of *grandeur mal* reminiscent of *The Third Man* or *The Silence of the Lambs*. Kem Nunn may never live down *Tapping the Source*. It's a young man's book, brash and hard-headed and fast and clever. *Tijuana Straits* is something different, and maybe even something better, ominous, compelling, and wise; a book not afraid to explore that black borderland between midlife and the dark country that lies just beyond.

And Now for Something Completely Different

I make no secret of being a Tolkien geek. I love the books, I love Peter Jackson's movie. I love Elijah Woods's prosthetic feet. I also love Hollywood and theatrical biographies—the sleazier and the more photographs, the better — which makes Sean Astin's autobiography my ideal Fun Read. Admittedly, the sleaze factor isn't high — Kenneth Anger wasn't available, alas, so this is no *Middle Earth Rising*; the book was ghostwritten with Joe Layden

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(author of *WWF Wrestlemania: The Official Insider's Story*, among other titles).

But the voice that comes through in *There and Back Again: An Actor's Tale* is very much Sean Astin's. If you've ever wanted to know how Samwise Gamgee *really* feels about Gandalf, this is the book for you. The son of Patty Duke and John Astin (his adoptive father), Sean Astin was born into the acting profession. As a kid he made a splashy debut in *The Goonies*, then went on to take roles in modern-day B-movies like *Icebreaker* and *Encino Man*, as well as failed blockbusters like *Memphis Belle*. The best thing about Astin's book is his humility and honesty, something you rarely find in Hollywood. This isn't to say he doesn't have ambitions and an ego — he does, and they're big ones — but he's also refreshingly modest about his own abilities, and blunt about the economics of the business. He's happily married, he has kids, and a mortgage on a nice suburban home in Encino; he needs to work. So, early in his career he takes on Disney's *Encino Man*, despite his opinion of the project —

> I read the script out loud while standing just off Hollywood Boulevard, snorting and laughing and dismissing it — I can vividly remember — saying, "This is the biggest piece of shit script I have ever read in my entire life."

You won't find *that* in Laurence Olivier's biography.

In true Hollywood fashion, Astin's life changes when Peter Jackson casts him as Sam in *The Lord of the Rings*. Anyone who loves Jackson's film — heck, anyone who hates it — will love this book. It's rife with details of the strenuous shoot, insider gossip, homey snapshots of Sean and the rest of the cast. There's a great, admiring chapter on Andy Serkis's work as Gollum; priceless sniping about Sir Ian McKellen, who is rather mean to poor Sean; sweet word-portraits of Peter Jackson and his family at home. Throughout, Astin comes across as being a lot like Sam — earnest, occasionally humorless, tirelessly hardworking, a devoted family man; selfless in his regard for his fellow actors (except for Sir Ian) and wonderfully candid about the whole film-making process and the rest of the cast. Where else will you find the answers to these burning questions:

•Are Frodo and Sam gay? (No.)

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•Did Sean ever actually finish reading *The Lord of the Rings*? (No.)

•What part of Viggo Mortensen's body bears his secret LOTR tattoo? (You'll have to read for yourself.)

•Was Sean really upset that he didn't get an Academy Award nomination? (Well, wouldn't *you* be?)

Astin's book ends with a lovely portrait of him backstage at the Oscars with Steven Spielberg, who had just presented the award for Best Picture.

> He said something I'll never forget.
>
> "You know how many kids around the world are happy right now, because the Academy finally agrees with them and has the same sensibilities? They wanted it for *Star Wars*; they wanted it for *Raiders*." He paused for a second.
>
> "And now the Academy has graduated in its thinking?" I interrupted. "And they'll honor fantasy and science fiction?"
>
> Steven nodded. A smile crossed his bearded face; even now, in his mid-fifties, he looked like a kid.
>
> "Yeah. I hope so."

Me too. This isn't an epic book about an epic film series; it's a view from the trenches. Onscreen, Sean Astin proved himself as an actor; here he proves himself as a decent human being. As most of you know, the two are rarely compatible.

Finally, an antidote for those still suffering from the insulin shock induced by the Christmas season (lo these months later): *The Devil in Design*, a collection of ghoulish antique Krampus postcards compiled by Monte Beauchamp for Fantagraphics. Krampus is a demonic figure with horns and a long, protruding, phallic tongue; in Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, and a few other European countries he accompanies St. Nicholas on his rounds, punishing naughty children by beating them or shackling them or tossing them into his sack. The full-color cards collected here date from the late 1800s to the early 1900s; they range from lurid *Struwwelpeter*-style Teutonic horrors to more subtle drawings reminiscent of the work of Art Spiegelman or even Arthur Rackham, albeit a Rackham who's been tweaking meth for too many nights in a row.

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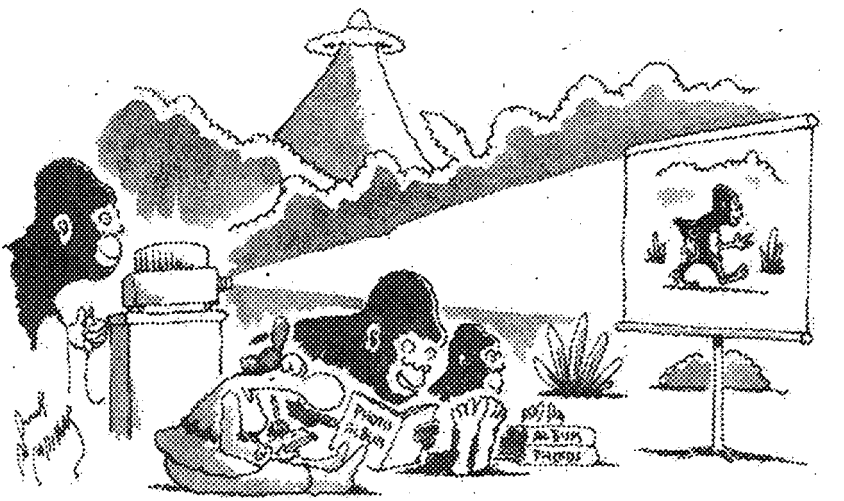
Krampus has a penchant for sneaking up behind lovers and for shackling pretty young women; judging from the images here, strong on whips, chains, and waggling tongues, he could also be the patron saint of heavy metal. At least one of these postcards served as the album cover for some now-forgotten 1960s rock band — Atomic Rooster? Mandrill? — and Krampus should sue the Rolling Stones for appropriating his lascivious tongue as their logo.

Some of the Krampus pictures are genuinely frightening — one surreal black-and-white photograph would have disturbed me as a child — and nearly all are beautiful examples of a macabre graphic style missing from contemporary holiday artwork. The book is printed on heavy stock but isn't well-bound, a shame as it's a book that rewards multiple viewings. Beauchamp's written notes are serviceable but left me wanting to know more about both the Krampus and the artists represented here. The latter, sadly, remain anonymous. The cards were and are avidly collected, and the book sent me to eBay to see what was available. The postcards go for twenty or thirty bucks a pop, which makes the book seem an even better deal.



"Day 63: Starting to regret being accepted by the gorillas."

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Alex Irvine is the author of A Scattering of Jades *and* One King, One Soldier. *A short novel of his,* Life of Riley, *is due to be published by Subterranean Press shortly. He also has a new novel scheduled for publication later this year—it's entitled* The Narrows *and this enticing stand-alone story is a part of it.*

The Golems of Detroit

By Alex Irvine

MIDNIGHT IN THE GOLEM factory. Sweat and clay and blisters. Twitching pains in the wrist and the small of the back. The door to Moises' sanctum opens and closes. The motion of Moises' passing bangs the row of hanging platforms together, as if the unlivened molds are thrashing in whatever nightmares afflict clay that knows it must be born.

Twenty-eight men work in what is now called Building G, a steel-and-concrete cube near the center of the Ford River Rouge complex, which will be the largest factory in the world for another month or so until Willow Run is complete. Inside Building G, the three-story space is ringed by a catwalk twelve feet above the floor. Two doors off the catwalk lead to overpasses that in turn connect to other buildings. One of the doors, on the north wall, is usually under tight surveillance by Building G's crew because that's where Swerdlow comes from, and it's a poor bunch of line rats that doesn't know where their supervisor is at all times. On the ground floor, three large bay doors face the train siding outside, and beyond it the canal slip that leads down to the turning basin and the Rouge

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River. Spanning the ceiling, a spine of girders supports a crane-mounted scoop bucket. Clay comes in on open train cars. The scoop bucket drops giant clots of streaming, weedy goo on a screen just inside the bay doors; the screener comes to life, shaking the bucketloads into pieces small enough to fall through the screen onto a conveyor belt. A work detail of a dozen men goes at this steady flow of head-sized gobs of clay with pick and shovel, breaking it down and pitching it onto the sorting line still squirming with swamp life. The breakdown and sorting crews are under strict orders to kill as few of these worms and snails and crawdads as they can manage, on Moises' eccentric theory that the incorporation of these little lives will make the golems that much stronger and more unpredictable in battle. Nobody knows if this strategy will pay off — they've sent a lot of golems off to Europe without seeing any real difference among them — but every man on the line has thought at least once that at the end of eight hours shoveling clay it's hard to worry about the lives of snails.

It would be a hell of a lot more efficient to use the same clay pits that provided most of the Rouge's bricks; after all, some of them are still on the property. But whether buying an iron mine or defending the Republic, Henry Ford is a tight man with a dollar. Even before they knew that golems made from American clay wouldn't leave North America, Ford had decided that good brickmaking clay was too useful to divert to a crazy Yid project like making golems, and anyway he had God's own bounty of the stuff coming out of the swampy parts of the soybean fields and woods he's paving for the Willow Run plant, which is starting to churn out B-24s even though parts of the plant itself are still just I-beams and acres of poured concrete floor. Then after the first golems just stood there on the docks at the Brooklyn Navy Yard refusing to get on the ship, someone somewhere wangled a way to get fresh riverbottom clay from Europe. All of this raw stuff comes with impurities in the form of roots, rocks, and about nine million bullet casings and bits of shrapnel per cubic yard — not to mention frogs, snakes, and occasionally fish, once in a while an unlucky muskrat. If this were a regular industrial operation, all of this stuff would be screened and pressed out of the clay, but Moises isn't rational on the topic, so anything that once had a pulse is supposed to be left on the sorting belt. At the same time the old rabbi is mortally convinced that only detailed human attention will get rid of all bits of metal. "You don't want to see

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what happens if I raise a golem that has a bent nail still in it," he says. The men on the line don't know what to make of Moises. He's hunched and ugly and speaks English like a bad caricature out of Ford's *Dearborn Independent* or one of Father Coughlin's nightmares, but the men on the Frankenline all remember their first night on the job — the way color slowly bloomed in the skin of that first golem, the way that when it sat up on its metal slab, the sole traces of its origin were the mud-gray color of its eyes and the tiny letters etched into the skin of its forehead. If Moises says that something bad would happen if they left a nail in the clay, they've all seen enough to believe it.

The sorting crew, a dozen men, works with trowels and rakes to break the clay down into clots that would fit nicely in your hand. At the end of the conveyor, these clots pass under a magnet with some kind of gadget attached that lights up if they've missed a piece of steel. If the gadget lights up, the belt stops until the sorting crew finds what set it off. Under that part of the belt is a bin full of nails, train sprockets, broken watches, all kinds of stuff. When the shift changes, the outgoing crew is supposed to roll the bin to the scrapyard behind the blast furnaces.

Every so often, more often than they would have figured given what the clay has been through to get to this point, a live frog springs out of the piles. If Swerdlow isn't in the neighborhood they stop the line and chase around after it. Whoever catches the frog decides what to do with it; the line is about evenly divided among three opinions. Some hold that the frog should be immobilized in the clay for molding into a golem; others that any frog with the gumption to live through excavation, transport, shoveling, picking, and sorting deserves a get-out-of-jail-free card by way of the canal; still others that the primary function of live frogs is to become frog legs.

Snakes are by common consent preserved to be put into Swerdlow's desk. This is a tradition that predates the Frankenline, predates even the war. Before the Rouge went union, back in 1938 or so when Swerdlow was one of Harry Bennett's Special Service goons, he had once made a Pole by the name of Czerkawski eat a dead snake right at his station, and then fired him for holding up the line. Then, the old-timers like to say, putting a snake in Swerdlow's desk was like being blooded in combat. There were consequences. Now all he does is charge out of his office and scream at

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whoever's walking by, but even this small reward is enough to keep the practice alive. What the hell, most of the guys on the Frankenline are spoiling for the war but held out of it by the scarlet 4F; they need someone to piss on once in a while.

Jared Cleaves is one of those guys. He'd be in the South Pacific somewhere, probably mopping up Guadalcanal, except he got in a car accident on the Pacific Coast Highway near the end of basic. The car rolled, and somewhere along the way to the bottom of a shallow ravine Jared stuck his hand through the windshield. Now the ring and pinkie fingers of his right hand don't move quite like they should; the Army says he's twenty percent disabled. He's still able to make little pieces of clay out of big pieces of clay, though. Most of the time he can convince himself that it's enough to contribute to the war effort, that he doesn't have to prove himself under fire.

This is harder today, though, because his wife Colleen is pregnant. They thought they were being careful; they had every intention of waiting until the end of the war; but there you go. The baby's due in November.

Jumping Jesus, a baby. A boy? A girl? He's got to make something of himself. Can't have a kid growing up seeing his old man come home every night covered in riverbottom.

The guys on either side of Jared are about as different as two men can be. Jem, on his left, is pure hillbilly, from the coal country in eastern Kentucky. Twenty years old, with a chip on his shoulder over his father being killed in a mine strike and memories of boiling shoe leather and grass for soup still fresh in his head. Jem is spoiling for a chance to get a snake into Swerdlow's desk. He swears he'll write his name on it first. Opposite Jem is Felton, who in Jared's estimate is about forty years old, been to one of the Negro colleges in the South and then come home to Detroit. Once Jared asked Felton why he was breaking up clay with a college degree, and Felton said it was better than working in the foundry. Which wasn't really any kind of answer at all.

The three of them form a kind of pod on the Frankenline since they're the only native speakers of English in Building G unless Swerdlow drops by to call them all malingering goldbricks who are killing fine American boys overseas through sheer laziness, and by God he ought to report them

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all as fifth columnists. Which is bunk, anyway; if anyone was going to report one of the boys on the Frankenline, it would be the razorcut gent in the black suit who stops by every day to look down from the catwalk and then step into Moises' office for a quick word. "If that ain't a spy," Felton says, "you can call me Tojo."

Typically Jem and Jared call him Tojo for an hour or so after every one of these appearances, just on general principles. Today, however, the spy comes and goes unnoticed by Jared because the only thought in his head is *Jumping Jesus, a baby.*

"Fellas," he says, "I have news."

"We took Paris," Jem says.

"Harry Bennett got religion," Felton says.

"Better," Jared says. "Colleen's in a family way."

Felton shakes his head. "Good Lord. Another Cleaves." He sticks out his hand and Jared shakes it. Jem pounds him on the back. Behind them, the molders look up in puzzlement and ask each other questions in five or six languages.

Jem turns around and spreads his arms. "Jared Cleaves is having a baby, y'all!" he announces. "A baby!" He makes a cradle of his arms and swings it back and forth, and a cheer rises from the molders and the other guys on the sorting line. Jared realizes he has a goofy smile on his face, and the realization makes him blush. He turns back to the belt and picks up his trowels.

SORTED CLAY TUMBLES down an incline to a conveyor that dumps it into a bin. From this bin, it's shoveled out onto long gurneys with shallow outlines of human forms stamped into them. The molding crew is all Jewish and all European; Moises won't have it any other way. Each golem is molded by a single man; if his shift ends while he's working on it, it's supposed to remain unfinished until he comes in the next day. When things are going right — when a wildcat rail strike doesn't hang up the clay and the screener doesn't jam and the magnetic doodad isn't on the fritz and the molders aren't drunk — Moises typically enlivens one golem for every two the crew puts together. He works sixteen-hour days to keep up. Whoever is running the Frankenline (and nobody is quite sure whether

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it's the OSS or G-2 or maybe the FBI; it sure as hell isn't Ford; Edsel might go for it, but he's a sick man and even when healthy not strong enough to stand up to the Old Man's loopy anti-Jewish mania) must be looking for another rabbi who knows the trick, but apparently Moises is onto a secret that nobody else knows and he isn't willing to share. Strange bird, Moises. If anyone on the Frankenline knows where he's from, it's the molders, and they aren't telling. Jared has heard that he lives over on Twelfth Street in the old Jewish neighborhood, but he's also heard that Moises never actually leaves the Rouge complex, and a third rumor has it that whoever runs the Frankenline keeps him under guard in a safe house for fear that Nazi agents will assassinate him. Where Moises is concerned, anything could be true.

As each new golem comes stalking blank-faced out of Moises' sanctum, a Hungarian by the name of Ferenc pushes the next gurney over to a series of hooks hanging from a track on the ceiling. Ferenc hooks four of them through the rings welded onto each corner of the gurney. With each group of four hooks dangles a switch; he throws it, and the gurney rises up about six feet off the ground. When Ferenc rings a bell on the wall of Moises' office, a portion of the office wall slides open. With a rattle the gurney moves through the opening, and the wall closes behind it. This happens roughly once an hour, and Jared registers in the back of his mind that it's happening now: the rattle of chains and hum of the crane motor act like a kind of subconscious clock. Another golem, another hour. This time it's four down, four to go; almost time for lunch.

Someone taps him on the arm and Jared turns to see that it's Moises himself. He has, for no good reason, a moment of pure panic, as if he's just been given the Finger of Death. Then, when his heart starts beating again, he says, "Hey, Moises," thinking, what'd I do?

"You have a baby," Moises said. "Is a happy thing. Mazel tov."

Jared's nodding. "Thanks, yeah. Mazel tov to you too."

Moises cracks a smile and shuffles back to his office. He pauses at the doorway and steps aside to let a golem out. The golem walks out the door to wait by the rail siding; Moises shuts the door behind him, and a few seconds later another gurney slides in to join him.

* * *

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They've all seen newsreel footage of the golems at work. Mostly this comes from the Aleutians, where the Army is slowly grinding down the Japanese garrison. Those golems are among the first to step off the Frankenline; it was a cold bucket of water when project planners realized that those golems, made of American clay, wouldn't leave the continent where they were — if you want to put it that way — born. This setback almost put the kibosh on the whole project, but it's all worked out now. The new golems go and get on the trains to New York and then troop right up onto freighters for the ride across the U-boat-infested North Atlantic. About a dozen ships carrying golems have gone down, precipitating a lively discussion among Jem, Jared, and Felton regarding their survival. Jared is of the opinion that they probably just turn to mush in the ocean, and Felton usually agrees with him. Jem holds out stubbornly for his vision of golems climbing from the wreckage at the bottom of the sea and setting out to walk the rest of the way to Europe. "Moises has to scrub one of the letters off 'em, don't he?" Jem always says. "That's the only way to kill 'em unless you shoot 'em all to pieces."

This is a good point, but Jared still thinks that ten thousand feet of salt water is every bit as rough on a golem as an artillery shell. They're all hoping that Jem is right, though, because it would be a pure rush to see pictures of one of their golems walking right up out of the ocean onto the beach in France. As it is, they hear that the golems are used just to scare the bejeezus out of the Nazis, and once in a while as diversions for covert missions or commando operations. There's no way to know how much of this is true.

Jared gets a rusted fishhook through his left thumb, and stomps around for a while cussing. "Can't talk like that when your baby's born," Jem says. "Shouldn't talk like that anyway."

"Shut up. I don't need no Bible-thumping hillbilly telling me how to talk."

"You got your shots?" Felton asks.

Jared is hunched over his injured hand, slowly working the fishhook the rest of the way through. "Goddammit. Yeah. I had my shots when I went in the Army."

"Hate to see you get lockjaw with a baby on the way."

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"Well, at least he wouldn't cuss around the baby," Jem says, and breaks up at his joke.

"Jem, I'm about to stick this fishhook in your eye, you don't shut up," Jared growls.

Swerdlow chooses this moment to appear. "Come on, ladies, Cleaves, you got something better to do than make golems?" He notices Jared pressing his thumb against the one dry spot on his coveralls. "Fingers hurt, Cleaves? Poor baby."

"Jared stuck a fishhook through his thumb," Jem says.

"Oh no," Swerdlow says. "A fishhook, give him a Purple Heart and send him home. Boy gets a fishhook in the thumb, he's done his duty. Gawd. What a bunch of goldbricks." He throws up his hands in disgust and leaves.

Jared is wishing he had some kind of death-ray vision. He wills it to happen, focusing on a mole just above Jem's left eyebrow. "Why can't you keep your mouth shut?" he says.

Jem gets sullen. "I was explaining."

"All right," Felton says. "How about we make some golems?"

Rattle rattle rattle creak. Last golem of the night tracks into Moises' sanctum. Everyone on the Frankenline has the same kind of clock sense as Jared; they all stretch, take their tools over to the long sinks that line the wall near the ground-floor doorway opposite the scoop bucket. Restaurant-style spray nozzles hang like dying steel-and-rubber sunflowers; the men of the Frankenline crank the hot water up all the way and blast this foreign clay down the drains that empty into the canal slip. A billion little silty bits of Europe, Jared thinks, finding their way to the Detroit River, and maybe after that Lake Erie and the St. Lawrence and who knows, maybe someday all the way home, returning transformed like the golems themselves. At the end of eight hours breaking up gobs of clay, these are the kind of thoughts that run through Jared's head; the blast of the water and the steam rising in his face wrap him up in a sensory cocoon, and he falls into an easy reverie. A baby. There's a thousand babies born every day, maybe every hour. It's the most natural thing in the world — but he has a bone-deep conviction that it is happening to him in a way that it's never happened to anyone else. If he was on Guadalcanal, he wouldn't be having a baby. Maybe two fingers wasn't such a terrible trade.

Jared starts imagining what the baby will be like when it's real, when

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it cries and waves its stubby hands and grabs onto his finger like he knows it will. Please let it change me, he thinks. I'll still just be a guy who spends his days breaking up clay, but I'll have a baby. He won't care about my fingers. He won't care that I'm not in the Army.

"Hey, Felton," Jem says. Jared looks up and blinks the steam out of his eyes. Jem is standing by the magnetic doodad. They check it at the end of every shift. "Did you turn this off?" Jem asks, and that's when all hell breaks loose.

There's a shout from Moises, and a roar that rattles every window in Building G. Bang — a huge dent appears in the tin wall of Moises' office next to the door. Bang — the dent bulges outward. And bang — the whole sheet of tin leaps away from its frame and a golem charges out onto the floor.

It looks like all the rest of the golems, but after the first glance something about the golem raises the hairs on the back of Jared's neck. Maybe it's the skin the color of old plaster, maybe the eyes like a drowned man's, maybe the just-askew motions of the body as it walks and turns its head to take in its surroundings. All golems look a little off, not quite human, with some quality that would make you notice them in a crowd even though afterward you'd say that there was nothing remarkable about them. This one, though, there's a charge coming off it, like the psychic equivalent of whacking your funnybone. It twitches; its head rolls back and forth as if it doesn't know how to move its eyes; and when it bangs into one of the empty gurneys, it rears back and slaps the gurney all the way across the floor to bang into the sorting line. Then a strange calm falls over it as it scopes out the expanse of concrete floor and the cluster of men around the sinks. Its head lowers and it walks toward them.

There are moments when you don't have to understand a language to know what someone is saying. This is one of them, as a half-dozen versions of *Let's get the hell out of here* tangle in the weirdly charged air. People scatter, and the golem must be getting used to its body because it moves with sudden decision and focus, barely missing Ferenc before the Hungarian makes it out the door and down the railroad tracks, trailing a string of gibberish that Jared doesn't think is words even in Hungarian. This diversion gets nearly everyone else enough room to clear the building; even Jem and Felton hightail it out through the bay doors facing the canal slip.

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Jared can't take his eyes off the golem. It veers away from the door Ferenc went through, and bangs into a nearly finished mold. An expression of odd confusion passes over its face, and it scoops a handful of the clay out of the mold. For a long moment it works the clay in its palm; bits fall to the floor. Then the golem stuffs the handful of clay in its mouth. Jared has a dislocated memory of his mother, maybe? grouching at his little brother Chucky. *God, kids like you, you'll put anything in your mouths*. The golem is distracted. It chews the clay, looking thoughtful.

Over its shoulder Jared sees Moises emerging from the shambles of his sanctum. He doesn't look injured, but his posture and expression are those of a man so afraid of what he must do that he has absented himself from his own mind so that he may do it. While the golem munches the almost-flesh of its — brother? cousin? — Moises walks toward it like a man sleepwalking, and, as if soothing it, rubs a hand down the left side of its forehead. Until then, Jared hasn't noticed the letters inscribed on the golem's skin; now he's taken with the way it looks strange as Moises obliterates the fourth letter. *Truth* becomes *dead*, and with its mouth open, weedy clay dribbling down its chin, the golem collapses into a heap of riverbottom.

You'll put anything in your mouths. Jared's mother's voice won't leave his head.

Moises takes a long, shuddering breath. Then he crouches next to the remains of the golem, taking an old man's care getting his balance on his haunches. His hands slide over the heap of dead clay, and pause. He digs one hand into the clay and comes up with a chunk of rusty metal. He holds it out in one upturned palm and with the other hand points an accusatory finger at Jared. "You. Thinking of baby," he says. "You don't pay attention."

A rifle shell? A nail from the sole of a boot? A belt buckle? Holy moly, Jared thinks. Moises was right. But when he opens his mouth, what comes out is, "The magnetic thing is broken."

Moises throws the piece of metal at him. It misses, pinging off the wall over the sinks. He stands there for another moment, then returns to his office. A moment passes. Then the chains rattle and the crane motor groans, and another gurney passes inside. If Jared took three steps to his right, he'd be able to see what was happening. Right then, though, that's the last thing in the world he wants to see.

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"Hey, uh, Moises?" he calls. "If the magnet's busted, you sure you should do that?"

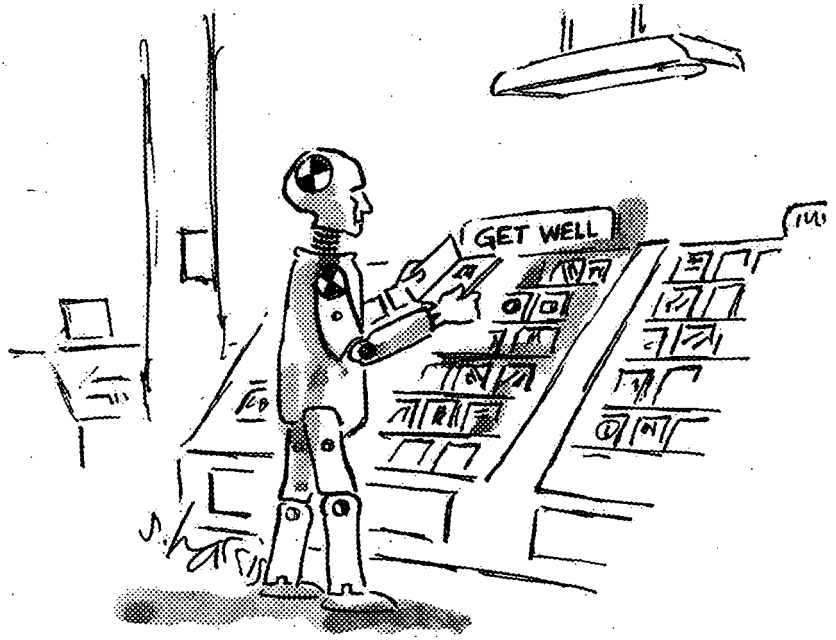
No answer.

He understands, not with any great flash of insight but with quiet satisfaction, as if he's just made a perfect tracing of his own face in a mirror. Moises is making offspring, and through them making his dream of a world risen from the broken rubble of the Europe that cast him out. One little piece of metal, one clay-buster who can't pay attention, makes no difference.

The Frankenline's various sorters and molders are coming back in. Jem and Felton peer in through the bay door. "Where'd it go?" Jem asks.

Everyone's looking at Jared, and he feels like he should say something, but he's filled up. Again he opens his mouth with no idea what will fall out.

"I'll be damned," Jared says. But what he's thinking is that fatherhood is going to be a hell of a thing.



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K. D. Wentworth lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where she works as an elementary school teacher and says she has mastered the art of cafeteria riot patrol. Her novels include The Imperium Game, Black/on/Black, Stars Over Stars, *and* Moonspeaker. *Her most recent book is a collaboration with Eric Flint,* The Course of Empire, *and she is currently collaborating with Mr. Flint on another novel.*

In this new story, she offers up a sweet and entertaining bit of blasphemy. No word yet from Mel Gibson about a possible film option.

Born-Again

By K. D. Wentworth

MY BEST FRIEND, HARMONY, wanted to come over and study, so I called home and asked Jesus what was for dinner. He said he didn't know and he didn't care. Since he was fasting, he wasn't coming out of his living room niche, even if Mom baked lasagna, his favorite. I should get my mind on more important things, he said, like the state of my immortal soul.

Jesus was always going on about souls. If Mom had understood how boring he was going to be once he learned to talk, she would never have taken out the loan to buy a stupid Son-of-God clone in the first place. I would have rather had a shiny black Hummer, but I was only two at the time and no one asked me.

Dad split when I was ten and Jesus was eight, said he couldn't take it anymore. Even at eight, Jesus was a bit much, bringing home road-kill kittens all the time so he could try to raise them from the dead.

Harmony thought having your own Jesus was creepy, said you might as well live in a church and drink holy water instead of orange juice for breakfast. But she was Catholic and had to listen to the priests rant every

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Sunday about the holy clones biz. You'd think she would have felt connected. After all, it was the Shroud of Turin that started the whole mess, but she said Protestant scientists dreamed all this up, so we could just live with it. Even though she was my best friend, she was a pain sometimes.

As for Jesus, he didn't like Harmony either. She was always rude to him and had this spiky black hair. He said the spikes reminded him of nails, and it doesn't take a brain surgeon to know how a Jesus feels about nails. Whenever she came over, he would mutter about "suffer the little children" and all that. Harmony would get mad and point out she was seventeen, not a stupid kid! Jesus would just smile knowingly, like he wasn't a good two years younger.

After school that day, Harmony and I came in the back door and dumped our books on the table. The kitchen still smelled like bacon from breakfast, and Jesus had totally ignored the dirty dishes in the sink. How could he be home all day and never lift a friggin' finger? I can't believe we're still making payments on him. Mom might as well have burned that money.

I had intermediate trig for homework, while Harmony was finishing her essay on *The Scarlet Letter*, the most clueless novel ever written. I'd already turned mine in. So Hester hooked up with the minister, I'd pointed out. So what? She was young. Why shouldn't she have a good time? Those Puritan dudes seriously needed to get over themselves.

At the counter, Jesus's eyes were practically crossed as he stared at a glass of water. His acne had flared up again, and he'd let his hair get long and ratty in imitation of you-know-who. He needed to get over himself too.

"That water's not going to change," I said, just to be mean.

"Shut up, Bailee," he said defensively. "It's already turning pink!"

"Yeah, right," I said.

Harmony flipped through *The Scarlet Letter*, then stared down at the text morosely. "Every time I try to read this, I want to slap that ho, Hester," she said. "Why didn't she just tell those morons to go — "

"Tolerance," Jesus said. He struck a noble stance, something at which he'd spent a lot of time practicing. "Judge not, lest ye be judged."

"Oh, give it a rest!" Harmony glared over her shoulder at his skinny ass. "Aren't you supposed to be off in a hole somewhere?"

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He picked up the glass and drained it. "Yes," he said, "definitely wine, a nice, full-bodied Cabernet."

"His hole is called a niche," I said, "and it's for meditation and prayer. He doesn't have to sit in it unless he wants to." I opened my trig book and pulled out a sheet of half-completed problems. "He's not a slave."

"He's not a person either, Bailee," Harmony said, "else he'd have to go to school like us."

Actually, the first few Jesus clones did go to school, but officials had quickly decided their presence was "too disruptive." Mom had tried to enroll him in woodworking classes down at the Vo-Tech, but he refused to attend even the first one, so these days our Jesus studied at home, when he did anything useful, which wasn't very often.

We worked for half an hour, while Jesus amused himself back in the pantry, pulling slices of bread to bits to see if he could make the pieces multiply.

Finally, the numbers in my problems were blurring. My brain was about to implode, and I couldn't stand it anymore. "I'm off to Holes-to-Go at the mall for another piercing," I said. "Lanie Andrews has four holes in her ears now too, and I'll just die if I don't get a fifth before she does."

"Didn't Principal Wingate say you couldn't have more than three piercings?" Harmony scraped back her chair. "You're already pushing the envelope. Do you want to get sent home again?"

"Yeah, wouldn't that just be too bad?" I stretched, then glanced over at Jesus. "Want to come?"

"Euew!" Harmony said.

Jesus brushed the crumbs off his hands. I noticed he was wearing his best faded jeans, suitably saggy and ragged around the cuffs, and a new orange Hawaiian shirt, artfully wrinkled. He was big for his age, taller than either one of us, and actually didn't look too bad, for someone supposed to be so sacred. Had he planned this all along?

He smiled, flashing us a mouthful of braces that featured a football on every tooth. "Isn't there a fountain at the mall?"

"Oh, no," Harmony said. She dabbed mousse on her black hair and ran her fingers through it. "Not that stupid walking-on-water stunt again! It's just too lame!"

"Promise," I said to him. "No water-stuff, or you can't go."

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"I can't stay long anyway," he said. "I have Group at five."

"And I suppose you want me to take you."

He shoved his hands into his pockets. "You could just give me the keys to your car."

"Right," I said and rolled my eyes, "like that's going to happen."

Even though Jesus was fifteen and had a Learner's Permit, Mom didn't even let him drive with her. He took too many chances because he kept trusting to a Higher Power. Well, so far that Higher Power hadn't ever come through at the crunch, and now two totaled cars later, this particular Jesus was on foot.

Harmony made him sit in the back so we could pretend like he wasn't there. He was there all right, though. I could feel him praying by the nasty prickle crawling up the back of my neck.

"Stop it, nerd," I said. "You know this is a prayer-free zone. Don't make me come back there and hurt you!"

"The way you drive, you'd better take all the help you can get," he said.

"I told you not to bring him!" Harmony looked mulish.

I parked at the mall, and we went in the north entrance, far away from the fountain and close to the twin Meccas of Abercrombie and Fitch and the Gap, not that any of us were packing money for new clothes. Mom was so stingy, and Harmony's dad was entirely unreasonable on the subject. He'd even taken away her credit card after that little incident with the mink halter.

Jesus, of course, was hopeless about cash. The minute Mom gave him even a few cents, he frittered it away on beggars or charities. That's not to say he doesn't want a new skateboard or the latest clothes. The Lord would provide, he always said, but it was Mom who had to figure out where those kinds of things would come from, after he'd blown his allowance.

Today, I had just enough to pay for getting my ears pierced, so Jesus wasn't getting any cash out of me. Harmony decided to amuse herself by trying on all the cool clothes she couldn't afford and headed for the Gap.

I told Jesus to sit on a bench outside the store while I got my ears done. Every time he sees the least bit of blood, he's all "I can heal you!" Très embarrassing. Sometimes I could just die.

"I have Group in an hour, Bailee," he reminded me as I went in. Like

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I could have forgotten. Sometimes I thought his group sessions were all that kept us sane.

When I came out with my new studs, he was gone. I swore under my breath, hoping he hadn't found a podium somewhere to harass bored shoppers again about loaves and fishes.

I swung by the Gap to retrieve Harmony, only to find Jesus there too, carrying her sack. "I thought you didn't have any money," I told her.

"I didn't." She dimpled at Jesus in a disgusting way. "But *he* did."

"Jesus?" I could feel my eyebrows puckering. "You've got to be kidding."

"I found a twenty dollar bill on the floor down at the Food Court," he said, "so I was looking for a beggar, but there aren't any in the mall, and then I ran into Harmony."

"And I was in serious need of this shirt." Harmony took the sack out of Jesus's hand. "It was an awesome act of charity!"

He was staring at her with an expression he usually reserved for the pictures of saints. "We have to go," I said uneasily. "Jesus has to get to Group."

JESUS'S GROUP is held every Wednesday afternoon at the YMCA in a room that reeks of chlorine, since it's next to the pool. I intended just to drop him off, but Harmony wanted to check out the meeting.

We were met at the door by Brad-Jesus, a more filled-out version of our own model. "Visitors are welcome," he said, "especially friends and family members, but you'll have to sit outside the circle and be quiet."

"No way." I shook my head. That many Jesuses in one place thoroughly creeped me out. "We'll pick him up when he's done."

"Oh, come on, Bailee," Harmony said. "Let's stay for a few minutes."

Brad-Jesus smiled at her with that beatific radiance they can all muster when they try, and she dragged me over to a row of metal chairs by the wall.

More Jesuses filed in, some younger than ours, others older. Each one was greeted with the assumed name he was encouraged by the group to adopt. Our Jesus had chosen Carson.

"That's a seriously cool name," Harmony whispered to me.

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"He thinks he's going to be one of the Fab Five," I said. My new piercings were throbbing. All I wanted was to go home and lie down.

"Gather 'round, folks," Brad-Jesus said with a wave of his arm. "We don't want to run out of time."

One of the attendees must have been new, because he kept walking around the circle like they were playing Musical Chairs. "Don't be shy," Brad-Jesus said. "We're all Christ here. No need to stand on ceremony."

The newcomer settled next to our Jesus, who moved over to keep an empty space between them.

"Now," Brad-Jesus said, "let's get the ritual questions out of the way. First, did anyone perform a miracle this week?"

Feet shuffled uncomfortably. Heads hung.

"Not even one?" Brad-Jesus looked disapproving. "Come on, people. We have to keep trying."

Our Jesus raised his hand. "I turned water into wine," he said.

I bolted to my feet. "Did not!"

He rounded on me with a murderous glare. "I did too!"

"Liar!" I said. "It wasn't even pink!"

"It was white wine, buttface!"

"Now, Carson-Jesus," Brad-Jesus said mildly. "The Historical Jesus didn't lie or call people names."

"How do you know?" our Jesus said. His face was red, and his acne stood out like brands. "It's not like he left a blog! Besides, I'm not him. None of us are!"

"You've got that right." I crossed my arms and sank back into my seat. "Stupid clones."

"We don't use the C-word here," Brad-Jesus said reproachfully.

"Look!" One of the Jesuses pointed at me. "Her ear! It's bleeding!"

Damn. I scrambled in my backpack for a tissue.

As though they had but one mind between them, the whole circle lurched to their feet. "I can heal it," one of them said fervently.

"No, let me!"

"Let me!"

"I want to do it!"

"Uh, Bailee?" Harmony tugged at my arm. "Maybe we should go?"

I scanned the approaching faces. They looked like they'd seen a

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half-price sale at Banana Republic. "Yeah," I said. "I think you're right."

We sprinted for the exit, while, behind us, Brad-Jesus exhorted his troops to regain their seats. "Anyone have a revelation this week?" he said, raising his voice to make himself heard. "Or maybe a precognitive event? Anyone know when the world's going to end?"

"I do," one said, and half of our pursuers stopped to listen. We lost the rest when we ducked through the pool area and left them with their mouths open as they watched the girls' synchronized swim team stand on their heads underwater.

Jesuses are so predictable.

Of course, our own Jesus wasn't so easily shaken off. "I'll never be able to show my face at Group again," he said as he threw himself into the back seat of my car.

I buckled my seat belt with a click. "I don't know why not. It looks just like every other face already there. How could they tell it was you?"

"That's harsh," he said.

"Yeah," Harmony said, "harsh." She turned and looked at Jesus over the seat. "I think you're way more handsome than the rest."

"Give me a break," I said.

"I'm hungry," Jesus said. "Let's stop at McDonald's."

I pulled out onto the street. A car I hadn't noticed screeched its brakes, and I shot it the finger. "I thought you were fasting."

"That was earlier," he said. "I'm done now."

I sighed. "Aren't you supposed to be able to turn stones into bread? I bet we could find some tasty pebbles at the park."

"Don't be dense," he said. "I want a Big Mac."

"Like you could pay." I turned the corner on two wheels.

"There's a little left from the twenty he found at the mall," Harmony said. "We could split one of those combo meals."

He leaned forward. "Supersized?"

So, of course, we had to pull in at Mickey D's and line up at the counter with all the other dweebs for a ten-block radius. I wasn't clogging up my arteries with that stuff. No way, but I had to keep an eye on Jesus, and Harmony was acting funny, like she'd thawed toward him. That twenty back at the mall had seriously messed up her judgment.

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She pulled out a five and a handful of change, then gave the money to Jesus while she searched the bottom of her purse for loose quarters.

Over by the napkins, Jesus spotted one of those silly plastic cash traps for the unwary, this one purporting to finance camps to teach underprivileged children how to "dress for success" in order to boost their self-esteem. Before I could stop him, he'd stuffed Harmony's entire cash reserve through the center slit.

Harmony looked up. "Here's another thirty-five...."

Jesus was beaming.

She stared at his empty hands. "What did you do with my money, fool?"

"Nothing he hasn't done a hundred times before," I said. "Come on. Let's blow this dump."

She couldn't get past it though. "You threw it all away?"

"I didn't throw it away; I donated it to a worthy cause," he said. "Don't you know that it's way easier to smoosh a camel through the eye of a needle than for a rich dude to get into heaven?"

"Barfbag!" She punched Jesus on the shoulder, then tipped the plastic charity bin, trying to maneuver the five dollar bill back to the slot.

"Hey," the manager called from behind the counter, "put that down!" He was a big guy with the build of a bowling pin.

Harmony shook the bin like a terrier with a rat. Two pennies and a metal washer fell out and rolled across the tile floor. "I want my money back!"

"You put it in, sweetcheeks, it stays in." The manager darted through the counter, then pushed her aside and righted the bin. All the change clinked back to the bottom. Sweat rolled greasily down his cheeks. "Now, do I call the police or are you three leaving?"

Then he squinted, taking a closer look at Jesus. "Another one of those damn holier-than-us boys. I should have known it. Get out of my store! We only serve real people here!"

Jesus got that bullheaded look that always meant there was going to be trouble. If the first Jesus was half as stubborn as this one, Mary and Joseph had their hands full. "Pharisee!" he said.

"Right, the police then." The manager pulled out his cell phone and started dialing.

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"No, we're leaving." I snagged Jesus by his shirt and dragged him toward the door. "See? This is us, leaving now."

"Let go!" Jesus aimed a punch at me that missed. I bet the other Jesus was a wuss when it came to fighting too.

I shook him until his braces rattled. "You get arrested again, and Mom will flip. I swear, if you don't get your ass back in the car right this minute, I'm going to tell your group about your cherub collection!"

He paled. "You wouldn't!"

"Try me," I said with all the deadly coolness I could muster.

"Cripes!" He shook off my hands. "You can be such a bitch sometimes."

"I bet the real Jesus didn't say 'bitch,'" Harmony said.

"That's because the real Jesus didn't know you!" He gave her a look that would have slagged steel, then slunk out to the parking lot. Harmony huffed along behind.

"Man, I can't take you anywhere!" I said as he slid into the back seat.

We dropped Harmony at her house because she had a date, someone she'd met through an online dating service, of all places. How smart was that?

Then we went home. Mom was already there, putting away cans of peas from out of a grocery sack. "Hi, kids," she said as we came through the door, "how was Group today?"

"Bunch of candy-ass whiners," Jesus said. "I can't stand any of them."

"I see," she said, as though she did, when, take it from me, she never had and never would. On the other hand, she had bought two fresh loaves of bread, so she did have his number in certain respects. Jesus was hell on bread and don't even get me started on him and fish.

"I'm going to my niche," Jesus said and stomped out of the room.

"Did something happen at Group?" Mom asked. "He seems grouchier than usual."

"How can you tell?" I said under my breath as I helped empty the grocery sacks.

"Bailee," she said, "we have to be patient with Jesus. It's hard on him. He has a lot to live up to, and he didn't ask to be here."

"Yeah, well, I didn't ask for him to be here either," I said.

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"I know," she said, putting an arm around me, "but it will all come out right in the end. We just have to hold on until it does."

"Does that include Dad?" I asked. "Is he out there somewhere holding on too?"

And of course she didn't have an answer for that.

MOM HAD gone to bed, and I was just finishing my trig problems about midnight, when Jesus slunk through the kitchen, all tricked out in black leather pants and a black T-shirt. I put the pencil down on the table with an irritated click. "Just where do you think you're going?"

"None of your business," he said. "Go back to your stupid *ho*-work."

"Oh, that's so funny," I said. "See me *not* laughing."

He didn't answer, just unlocked the door and disappeared into the night. Great, I thought, just great. When he was missing in the morning, Mom would blame me. I grabbed my keys and followed.

Half a block ahead, he stalked down the sidewalk without looking over his shoulder. I tracked him to a grocery store parking lot six blocks away, then hung back behind a telephone pole across the street and observed.

A bunch of cars had parked over there, even though the store had been closed for hours. More Jesuses had gathered than I'd ever seen in one place before, at least thirty, all milling and laughing, talking just like regular people. Most of them were dressed in black leather, and ours blended right in. He actually looked happy.

I thought I saw a girl in the middle of the crowd, but all the rest were clones. The hair stood up on the back of my neck when I realized they each wore a cross on a chain around their necks or in their ears. Some of the crosses were even jeweled and glittered under the street lights. That was seriously creepy. I mean, if I were a Jesus, the last thing I'd want to see would be a stupid cross.

"All right, let's get started!" one of them yelled over the general din, and the conversation died away. "Who's got the test case?"

"Here she is," a voice said and dragged a girl forward by one hand. She had spiky black hair just like Harmony.

"Let go!" she said in a high, squeaky voice, and I realized it *was* Harmony, dressed in her tightest, shortest black dress. My hands tightened on the

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telephone pole. What was she doing mixed up with this bunch? She didn't even like *our* Jesus.

She was wearing a ton of purple eyeshadow, too. "Where's the band?" she said, gazing around in dismay.

"So, go ahead and kill her," a tall older Jesus said. He gazed down at his spread fingers. "I feel like I can really do it tonight."

"Everybody gets a turn," another Jesus said. He was wearing red leather and his cross was studded with rubies.

"What do you mean, 'kill?'" Harmony tugged the clingy black skirt down over her hips. "You said we were going to a rave."

A nasty snicker ran through the crowd.

"This *is* a rave," someone said. "A Jesus rave!"

They all laughed louder.

"I'm going home!" I could hear tears in Harmony's voice. "You all are just as stupid as I thought!"

"Come on, guys," the red-leather guy said. "We can't raise her unless she's dead first. Let's get it done!"

Harmony tried to push through the crowd, but several Jesuses caught her arms. I closed my eyes and tried to think. The best bet would be to call 911, but I'd left my cell phone at home to recharge. And if I took the time to go back, it would be too late before the police got here.

Think, Bailee, think! I told myself. You've lived with a Jesus practically your whole life. Come up with something!

Harmony shrieked, and I bolted across the street. "Oh, this is so brave, yeah, real macho!" I said and shoved my shaking hands in my pockets. "The papers will just love this."

"Another candidate," Red-Leather said. "This is shaping up to be a bountiful night."

Harmony looked up at me from the ground, mascara running down her cheeks. Someone had stuffed a souvenir Vatican bandana in her mouth.

"The police are on their way," I said as a knot of grinning Jesuses advanced on me. "I just thought you studs might like to know."

"Go home, Bailee!" It was our Jesus, standing off to one side. "No one wants you here."

"Yeah, not even me," I said. I caught and held his gaze. "Go home yourself."

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"This is important stuff," he said. "Don't meddle in what you can't understand."

"All those dead kittens you used to drag in," I said. "They didn't get dead by themselves, did they?" I bent down and pulled Harmony onto her feet. She was sobbing, and her wrists were tied with shoelaces.

The mob of Jesuses pressed in.

"No," he said, hands jammed into his pockets. He looked sullen. "That's part of the initiation."

"Just like Harmony here?" I wrenched at the shoelaces but they were knotted too tight. Dammit, I needed a knife.

"We have to practice, stupid," he said, "or we'll never get it right."

"Well, practice on something else," I said. "If Mom hears about this, you'll be grounded for life!" I took Harmony by the arm. "We're leaving."

"You're not going anywhere," Red-Leather said.

All the years of trying to cope with a Jesus hit critical mass inside my brain. I'd had it with the whole lot, all these weirdos trying to live up to the historical Jesus, which was stupid, because who knew really what He'd done, or why He'd done any of it. "Get out of my face, Mr. I'm-So-Holy, or I'll rip you a new one!"

Red-Leather stepped back, surprised.

"You're idiots," I said, "all of you! Always trying to be someone else instead of who you really are! I'm sick of all of you!"

"Two deaths instead of one!" someone in the back shouted. "Lots more practice tonight!" The crowd laughed and surged forward.

I shuddered. "Come on, Harmony," I said under my breath. "Let's get out of here."

She swayed against me, too terrified to move.

"Look!" a voice cried from the back. "Over there! A burning bush!"

The horde of Jesuses hesitated.

"No, wait!" the voice called again. "I was wrong. By all that's holy, it's *two* burning bushes!"

They turned and saw smoke rising greasily from a pair of forsythia bushes in the landscaping strip on the other side of the parking lot. "Dad!" one of them cried, then they were all running toward the bushes, yelling demands.

Except for one Jesus in black leather pants and braces, and sporting a bad case of acne. Left behind, he watched his fellow clones gather around

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the two fires, hopping up and down, gesticulating and laughing. "Clueless, the whole lot of them," he said and stuffed the book of matches back into his pocket.

It took a Jesus to know how to get to the rest, I guess. "Are you coming home?" I said.

He cut the shoelaces binding Harmony's hands with his pocketknife. "Yeah," he said, "might as well."

Supporting Harmony between us, we hurried across the street and around the corner before the Jesuses noticed their burning bushes were strangely incommunicado.

"You know those dead kittens?" he said as we walked in and out of the pools of light from the street lamps.

"Yeah?"

"I got them from the pound, after they were already dead," he said.

"I know," I said, and all along I really had.

I called the police when we got back to the house and told them what had happened. Harmony's father tried to press charges, but the police lineup the next day was a joke. She'd been lured to the gang meeting by a Jesus she'd met online, but it wasn't Red-Leather, and who could tell the rest apart?

Despite the gang's boasts about "practicing," the police had no unsolved disappearances on the books within the last six months, so it was most likely just big talk. We had to be satisfied with breaking up the Jesus gang. Later, though, I did hear they formed a touch football league for the whole lot as a more appropriate outlet for their aggressive feelings.

Mom grounded our Jesus, of course, but only for a month, not too bad, considering his part in the affair. He'd made it right in the end, she said, and he had. I couldn't argue with that.

She says he needs to get out of his living room niche more and is making him attend that woodworking class down at Vo-Tech. It's been two weeks, and he's actually passing, so who says there aren't any real miracles anymore?

As for me, I'm trying to cut him a bit of slack. I guess we all get the Jesus we deserve.

And it could have been worse. Mom might have been able to contract for a Virgin Mary instead.

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Warning: those of you who favor our lighter and sweeter stories will probably want to borrow someone else's eyes to read this one. Laird Barron writes dark and often disturbing stories like "Old Virginia" that are apt to make you check the locks on the doors several times. This novella is one such saga, and an unrelenting one at that—a tough-guy tale about how the hired muscle got a lesson in art. Perhaps we should also issue a warning for them what likes tales from the dark side: you'll want to check your schedule before starting this story, because once you get started, it's not likely to let you go.

The Imago Sequence

By Laird Barron

Imago. Imago. Imago.
—Wallace Stevens

1.

LIKE THE SHROUD OF TURIN, the disfigured shape in the photograph was a face waiting to be born. An inhuman face, in this instance — the Devil, abstracted, or a black-mouthed sunflower arrested mid-bloom. Definitely an object to be regarded with morbid appreciation, and then followed by a double scotch to quash the heebie-jeebies.

I went to Jacob Wilson's Christmas party to see his uncle's last acquisition, one that old man Theodore hadn't stuck around to enjoy. A *natural Rorschach*, Jacob said of the photo. It had been hanging in the Seattle Art Museum for months, pending release at the end of its show. Jacob was feeling enigmatic when he called about the invitation three days before Christmas and would say no more. No need — the hook was set.

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I hadn't talked to Jacob since the funeral. I almost skipped his party despite that guilt, aware of the kind of people who would attend. Whip-thin socialites with quick, sharp tongues, iron-haired lawyers from colonial families, and sardonic literati dredged from resident theater groups. Sleek, wealthy, and voracious; they inhabited spheres far removed from mine. As per custom, I would occupy the post of the educated savage in Jacob's court. An orangutan dressed for a calendar shoot, propped in the corner to brood artfully. Perhaps I could entertain them with my rough charm, my lowbrow anecdotes. It wasn't appealing. Nonetheless, I went because I always went, and because Carol gave me her sweetest frown when I hesitated; the one that hinted of typhoons and earthquakes.

The ride from my loft in downtown Olympia served to prepare my game face. I took the 101 north, turned onto Delphi Road and followed it through the deep, dark Capitol Forest and up into the Black Hills. Carol chattered on her cell, ignoring me, so I drove too fast. I always drove too fast these days.

The party was at full steam as I rolled along the mansion's circle drive and angled my rusty, four-door Chrysler into a slot among the acres of Porsches, Jaguars, and Mercedes. Teddy Wilson might've only been a couple of months in his grave, but Jacob was no neophyte host of galas. He attracted the cream, all right.

Bing Crosby and a big band were hitting their stride when the front doors gave way. A teenage hood in a spiffy white suit grabbed our coats. I automatically kept one hand over my wallet. The bluebloods congregated in a parlor dominated by a fiery synthetic tree. A slew of the doorman's white-tuxedoed brethren circulated with trays of champagne and hors d'oeuvres. The atmosphere was that of a cast party on the set of *Casablanca*. Jarring the illusion was Wayne Newton's body double slumped on the bench of the baby grand, his pinky ring winking against the keys. I didn't think he was playing; a haphazard pyramid of shot glasses teetered near his leg and he looked more or less dead.

Guests milled, mixing gleeful ennui with bad martinis. Many were sufficiently drunk to sand down the veneer of civility and start getting nasty. Jacob presided, half seas over, as the Cockney used to say, lolling before his subjects and sycophants in Byzantine splendor. I thought, *Good god, he's wearing a cape!* His attire was a silken clash of maroon and

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mustard, complete with ruffles, a V-neck shirt ripped from the back of a Portuguese corsair, billowing pantaloons, and wooden sandals that hooked at the toe. A white and gold cape spread beneath his bulk, and he fanned himself with a tricorner hat. Fortunately, he wasn't wearing the hat.

Carol glided off to mingle, stranding me without a backward glance. I tried not to take it personally. If not for a misfortune of birth, this could have been her tribe.

Meanwhile, I spotted the poster-sized photograph upon its easel, fixed in the center of the parlor. Heavy as a black hole, the photograph dragged me forward on wires. Shot on black and white, it detailed a slab of rock, which I assumed was subterranean. Lacking a broader frame of reference, it was impossible to know. The finer aspects of geology escaped me, but I was fascinated by the surreal quality of this glazed wall, its calcified ridges, webbed spirals and bubbles. The inkblot at its heart was humanoid, head twisted to regard the viewer. The ambient light had created a blur not unlike a halo, or horns, depending on the angle. This apish thing possessed a broad mouth slackened as an unequal ellipse. A horrible silhouette; lumpy, misshapen, and dead for epochs. Hopefully dead. Other pockets of half-realized darkness orbited the formation; fragments splintered from the core. More cavemen, devils, or dragons.

Hosts occurred to me.

A chunky kid in a turtleneck said it actually resembled a monstrous jellyfish snared in flowstone, but was undoubtedly simple discoloration. Certainly not any figure — human or otherwise. He asked Jacob his opinion. Jacob squinted and declared he saw only the warp and woof of amber shaved bare and burned by a pop flash. Supposedly another guest had witnessed an image of Jesus on Golgotha. This might have been a joke; Jacob had demolished the contents of his late uncle's liquor cabinet and was acting surly.

I seldom drank at Jacob's cocktail socials, preferring to undertake such solemn duty in the privacy of my home. But I made a Christmas exception, and I paid. Tumblers began clicking in my head. A queasy jolt nearly loosened my grip on my drink, bringing sharper focus to the photograph and its spectral face in stone. The crowd shrank, shivered as dying leaves, became pictographs carved into a smoky cave wall.

A dung fire sputtered against the encroaching well of night, and

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farther along the cave wall, scored with its Paleolithic characters, a cleft sank into the humid earth. Flies buzzed, roaches scuttled. A reed pipe wheedled an almost familiar tune —

My gorge tasted alkaline; my knees buckled.

This moment of dislocation expanded and burst, revealing the parlor still full of low lamplight and cigarette smog, its mob of sullen revelers intact. Jacob sprawled on his leather sofa, regarding me. His expression instantly subsided into a mask of flabby diffidence. It happened so smoothly and I was so shaken I let it go. Carol didn't notice; she was curled up by the fireplace laughing too loudly with a guy in a Norwegian sweater. The roses in their cheeks were brick-red and the sweater guy kept slopping liquor on the rug when he gestured.

Jacob waved. "You look shitty, Marvin. Come on, I've got medicine in the study."

"And you look like the Sun King."

He laughed. "Seriously, there's some grass left. Or some vicodin, if you prefer."

No way I was going to risk Jacob's weed if it had in any way influenced his fashion sense. On the other hand, vicodin sounded too good to be true. "Thanks. My bones are giving me hell." The dull ache in my spine had sharpened to a railroad spike as it always did during the rainy season. After we had retreated to the library and poured fresh drinks, I leaned against a bookcase to support my back. "What's it called?"

He sloshed whiskey over yellow teeth. "*Parallax Alpha*. Part one of a trio entitled the *Imago Sequence* — if I could lay my hands on *Parallax Beta* and *Imago*, I'd throw a *real* party." His voice reverberated in the rich, slurred tones of a professional speaker who'd shrugged off the worst body blows a bottle of malt scotch could offer.

"There are two others!"

"You like."

"Nope, I'm repulsed." I had gathered my nerves into one jangling bundle; sufficient to emote a semblance of calm.

"Yet fascinated." His left eyelid drooped in a wink. "Me too. I'd kill to see the rest. Each is a sister of this piece — subtle perspective variances, different fields of depth, but quite approximate."

"Who's got them — anybody I know?"

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"*Parallax Beta* is on loan to a San Francisco gallery by the munificence of a collector named Anselm Thornton. A trust fund brat turned recluse. It's presumed he has *Imago*. Nobody is sure about that one, though. We'll get back to it in a minute."

"Jake — what do you see in that photo?"

"I'm not sure. A tech acquaintance of mine at UW analyzed it. 'Inconclusive,' she said. *Something's* there."

"Spill the tale."

"Heard of Maurice Ammon?"

I shook my head.

"He's obscure. The fellow was a photographer attached to the Royal University of London back in the '40s and '50s. He served as chief shutterbug for pissant expeditions in the West Indies and Africa. Competent work, though not Sotheby material. The old boy was a craftsman. He didn't pretend to be an artist."

"Except for the *Imago* series."

"Bingo. *Parallax Alpha*, for example, transcends journeyman photography, which is why Uncle Teddy was so, dare I say, obsessed." Jacob chortled, pressed the glass to his cheek. His giant, red-rimmed eye leered at me. "Cecil Eaton was the first to recognize what Ammon had accomplished. Eaton was a Texas oil baron and devoted chum of Ammon's. Like a few others, he suspected the photos were of a hominid. He purchased the series in '55. Apparently, misfortune befell him and his estate was auctioned. Since then the series has changed hands several times and gotten scattered from Hades to breakfast. Teddy located this piece last year at an exhibit in Seattle. The owner got committed to Grable and the family was eager to sell. Teddy caught it on the hop."

"Define obsession for me." I must've sounded hurt, being kept in the dark about one of Teddy's eccentric passions, of which he'd possessed legion, because Jacob looked slightly abashed.

"Sorry, Marvo. It wasn't a big deal — I never thought it was important, anyway. But... Teddy was on the hunt since 1987. He blew maybe a quarter mill traveling around following rumors and whatnot. The pieces moved way too often. He said it was like trying to grab water."

"Anybody ever try to buy the whole enchilada?"

"The series has been fragmented since Ammon originally sold two to

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Eaton and kept the last for himself — incidentally, no one knows much about the final photograph, *Imago*. Ammon never showed it around and it didn't turn up in his effects."

"Where'd they come from?"

"There's the weird part. Ammon kept the photos' origin a secret. He refused to say where he took them, or what they represented."

"Okay. Maybe he was pumping up interest by working the element of mystery." I'd watched enough artists in action to harbor my share of cynicism.

Jacob let it go. "Our man Maurice was an odd duck. Consorted with shady folks, had peculiar habits. There's no telling where his mind was."

"Peculiar habits? Do tell."

"I don't know the details. He was smitten with primitive culture, especially obscure primitive religions — and most especially the holy pharmaceuticals that accompany certain rites." He feigned taking a deep drag from a nonexistent pipe.

"Sounds like a funky dude. He lived happily ever after?"

"Alas, he died in a plane crash in '57. Well, his plane disappeared over Nairobi. Same difference. Bigwigs from the University examined his journals, but the journals didn't shed any light." Jacob knocked back his drink and lowered his voice for dramatic effect. "Indeed, some of those scholars hinted that the journals were extremely cryptic. Gave them the willies, as the campfire tales go. I gather Ammon was doubtful of humanity's long-term survival; didn't believe we were equipped to adapt with technological and sociological changes looming on the horizon. He admired reptiles and insects — had a real fixation on them.

"The series went into private-collector limbo before it was subjected to much scrutiny. Experts debunked the hominid notion. Ammon's contemporaries suggested he was a misanthropic kook, that he created the illusion to perpetrate an intricate hoax."

Something in the way Jacob said this last part caused my ears to prick up. "The experts only satisfy four out of five customers," I said.

He studied his drink, smiled his dark smile. "Doubtless. However, several reputable anthropologists gave credence to its possible authenticity. They maintained official silence for fear of being ostracized by their peers, of being labeled crackpots. But if someone proved them correct...."

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"The photos' value would soar. Their owner would be a celebrity, too, I suppose." Finally, Jacob's motives crystallized.

"Good god, yes! Imagine the scavenger hunt. Every swinging dick with a passport and a shovel would descend upon all the remote sites where Ammon ever set foot. And let me say, he got around."

I sat back, calculating the angles through a thickening alcoholic haze. "Are the anthropologists alive; the guys who bought this theory?"

"I can beat that. Ammon kept an assistant, an American grad student. After Ammon died, the student faded into the woodwork. Guess who it turns out to be? — The hermit art collector in California. Anselm Thornton ditched the graduate program, jumped the counterculture wave in Cali — drove his upper-crust, Dixie-loving family nuts, too. If anybody knows the truth about the series, I'm betting it's him."

"Thornton's a southern gentleman."

"He's of southern stock, anyhow. Texas Panhandle. His daddy was a cattle rancher."

"Longhorns?"

"Charbray."

"Ooh, classy." I crunched ice to distract myself from mounting tension in my back. "Think papa Thornton was thick with that Eaton guy? An oil baron and a cattle baron — real live American royalty. The wildcatter, a pal to the mysterious British photographer; the Duke, with a son as the photographer's protégé. Next we'll discover they're all Masons conspiring to hide the missing link. They aren't Masons, are they?"

"Money loves money. Maybe it's relevant, maybe not. The relevant thing is Thornton Jr. may have information I desire."

I didn't need to ask where he had gathered this data. Chuck Shepherd was the Wilson clan's pet investigator. He worked from an office in Seattle. Sober as a mortician, meticulous and smooth on the phone. I said, "Hermits aren't chatty folk."

"Enter Marvin Cortez, my favorite ambassador." Jacob leaned close enough to club me with his whiskey breath and squeezed my shoulder. "Two things. I want the location of this hominid, if there is a hominid. There probably isn't, but you know what I mean. Then, figure out if Thornton is connected to...the business with my uncle."

I raised my brows. "Does Shep think so?"

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"I don't know what Shep thinks. I do know Teddy contacted Thornton. They briefly corresponded. A few weeks later, Teddy's gone."

"Damn, Jake, that's a stretch — never mind. How'd they make contact?"

Jacob shrugged. "Teddy mentioned it in passing. I wasn't taking notes."

"Ever call Thornton yourself, do any follow-up?"

"We searched Teddy's papers, pulled his phone records. No number for Thornton, no physical address, except for this card — the Weston Gallery, which is the one that has *Parallax Beta*. The director blew me off — some chump named Renfro. Sounded like a nut job, actually. I wrote Thornton a letter around Thanksgiving, sent it care of the gallery. He hasn't replied. I wanted the police to shake a few answers out of the gallery, but they gave me the runaround. Case closed, let's get some doughnuts, boys!"

"Turn Shep loose. A pro like him will do this a lot faster."

"Faster? I don't give a damn about faster. I want answers. The kind of answers you get by asking questions with a lead pipe. That isn't up Shep's alley."

I envisioned the investigator's soft, pink hands. Banker's hands. My own were broad and heavy, and hard as marble. Butcher's hands.

Jacob said, "I'll cover expenses. And that issue with King...."

"It'll dry up and blow away?" Rudolph King was a contractor on the West Side; he moonlighted as a loan shark, ran a pool hall and several neat little rackets from the local hippie college. I occasionally collected for him. A job went sour; he reneged on our arrangement, so I shut his fingers in a filing cabinet — a bit rough, but there were proprietary interests at stake. Jacob crossed certain palms with silver, saved me from making a return appearance at Walla Walla. Previously, I did nine months there on a vehicular assault charge for running over a wise-mouth pimp named Leon Berens. Berens had been muscling in on the wrong territory — a deputy sheriff's, in fact, which was the main reason I only did a short hitch. The kicker was, after he recovered, Berens landed the head bartender gig at the Happy Tiger, a prestigious lounge in the basement of the Sheraton. He was ecstatic because the Happy Tiger was in a prime spot three blocks from the Capitol Dome. Hustling a string of five hundred-

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dollar-a-night-call-girls for the stuffed shirts was definitely a vertical career move. He fixed me up with dinner and drinks whenever I wandered in.

"Poof."

Silence stretched between us. Jacob pretended to stare at his glass and I pretended to consider his proposal. We knew there was no escape clause in our contract. I owed him and the marker was on the table. I said, "I'll make some calls, see if I can track him down. You still want me to visit him...well, we'll talk again. All right?"

"Thanks, Marvin."

"Also, I want to look at Teddy's papers myself. I'll swing by in a day or two."

"No problem."

We ambled back to the party. A five-piece band from the Capitol Theatre was gearing up for a set. I went to locate more scotch. When I returned, Jacob was surrounded by a school of liberal arts piranhas, the lot of them swimming in a pool of smoke from clove cigarettes.

I melted into the scenery and spent three hours nursing a bottle of mineral water, avoiding eye contact with anyone who looked ready for conversation. I tried not to sneak too many glances at the photograph. No need to have worried on that score; by then, everyone else had lost complete interest.

Around midnight Carol keeled over beside the artificial tree. The guy in the Norwegian sweater moved on to a blonde in a shiny dress. I packed Carol in the car and drove home, grateful to escape another Jacob Wilson Christmas party without rearranging somebody's face.

2.

NOBODY KNEW if Theodore Wilson was dead, it was simply the safe way to bet. One knife-bright October morning the coastguard had received a truncated distress signal from his yacht, *Pandora*, north of the San Juans. He'd been on a day trip to his lover's island home. Divers combed the area for two weeks before calling it quits. They found no wreckage, no body. The odds of a man surviving more than forty minutes in that frigid water were minimal, however. Teddy never slowed down to raise a family,

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so Jacob inherited a thirteen-million-dollar estate for Christmas. It should've been a nice present for me as well — I'd been Jake's asshole buddy since our time at State.

College with Jacob had been movie-of-the-week material — the blue-collar superjock meets the royal wastrel. Me on a full wrestling scholarship and Jacob starring as the fat rich boy who had discovered superior financial status did not always garner what he craved most — adulation. Thick as ticks, we shared a dorm, went on road trips to Vegas, spent holidays at the Wilson House. Eventually he convinced his globetrotting uncle to support my Olympic bid. It was a hard sell — the elder Wilson had no use for contemporary athletic competition. Descended from nineteenth-century New England gentry, he favored the refined pursuits of amateur archeology, ancient philology, and sailing — but young Jacob was glib and the deal was made. Never mind that I was a second-rate talent blown up on steroids and hype, or that two of my collegiate titles were fixed by thick-jowled Irishmen who drank boilermakers for breakfast and insisted wrestling was a pansy sport.

Teddy dropped me more than ten years ago. He lost a bucket of cash and a serious amount of face among his peers when I tanked in '90 before the Olympic Trials. The Ukrainian super heavyweight champion broke my back in two places during an exhibition match. Sounded like an elephant stepping on a stick of wet kindling.

Bye, bye, macho, patriotic career. Hello physician-prescribed dope, self-prescribed booze, and a lifetime of migraines that would poleax a mule.

Really, it was a goddamned relief.

I got familiar with body casts, neck braces, and pity. Lately, the bitter dregs of a savings account kept a roof over my head and steak in my belly. A piecemeal contract to unload trucks for a couple Thurston County museums satisfied a minor art fetish. Mama had majored in sculpture, got me hooked as a lad. Collecting debts for the local "moneylenders" was mainly a hobby — just like dear old Pop before somebody capped him at a dogfight. I was a real Renaissance man.

I met Carol while I was politely leaning on her then-boyfriend, a BMW salesman with a taste for long-shot ponies and hard luck basketball teams. Carol worked as a data specialist for the department of corrections. She

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found the whole failed-athlete turned arm-breaker routine erotic. What should've been a weekend fling developed into a bad habit that I hadn't decided the best way to quit.

The day after the party I asked her what she thought of Jacob's photograph. She was stepping out of the shower, dripping hair wrapped in a towel. "What photograph?" she asked.

I stared at her.

She didn't smile, too busy searching for her earrings. Probably as hung-over as I was. "Oh, that piece of crap his uncle bought off that crazy bitch in Seattle. I didn't like it. Piece of crap. Where are my goddamned earrings."

"Did you even look at it?"

"Sure."

"Notice anything unusual?"

"It was unusually crappy. Here we go." She retrieved her earrings from the carpet near her discarded stockings. "Why, he try to sell it to you? For god's sake, don't buy the ugly thing. It's crap."

"Not likely. Jacob wants me to do a little research."

Carol applied her lipstick with expert slashes, eyed me in her vanity while she worked. "Research, huh?"

"Research, baby," I said.

"Don't do anything too stupid." She shrugged on her coat, grabbed an umbrella. It was pouring out there.

"Yeah," I said.

"Yeah, right. And don't buy that crappy photo." She pecked my cheek, left me sneezing in a cloud of perfume and hairspray.

New Year's Eve sneaked up on me. I stopped dragging my feet and made calls to friends of friends in the Bay area, hoping to get a line on the enigmatic Mr. Thornton. No dice. However, the name triggered interesting matches on the Internet. According to his former associates, a couple of whom were wards of the federal penal system, Thornton had been a flower child; an advocate of free love, free wine, and free thinking. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Shep's intelligence was more thorough. After quitting grad school Thornton organized a commune in San Francisco in the '60s, penned

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psychedelic tracts about the nature of faith and divine cosmology, appeared on local talk radio and did cameos in film documentaries. He'd also gotten himself charged with kidnapping and contributing to the delinquency of minors. Disgruntled parents accused him of operating a cult and brainwashing runaway teens. Nothing stuck. His house burned down in '74 and the commune disbanded, or migrated; reports were fuzzy.

Thornton resurfaced in 1981 to purchase *Parallax Beta* at an estate sale in Manitoba. Its owner, a furrier named Robespierre, had come to an unfortunate fate — Robespierre got raving drunk at a party, roared off in his brand-new Italian sports car and plunged into a ravine. Authorities located the smashed guardrail, but no further trace of the car or its drunken occupant.

Thornton's relatives were either dead or had disowned him. There was a loyal cousin in Cleveland, but the lady suffered from Alzheimer's, thus tracking him through family was a no-go. Shep confirmed getting stonewalled by the Weston Gallery. Ah, a dead end; my work here was done.

Except, it wasn't.

It began as the traditional New Year's routine. I drank and contemplated my navel about a wasted youth. I drank and contemplated the gutted carcass of my prospects. I drank and contemplated what *Parallax Alpha* was doing to my peace of mind.

Initially, I wrote it off as interest due on multiple fractures and damaged nerves. My lower back went into spasms; pain banged its Viking drum. I chased a bunch of pills with a bunch more eighty-proof and hallucinated. With sleep came ferocious nightmares that left welts under my eyes. *Dinosaurs trumpeting, roaches clattering across the hulks of crumbling skyscrapers. Dead stars in a dead sky. Skull-yellow planets caught in amber — a vast, twinkling necklace of dried knuckles. The beast in the photograph opening its mouth to batten on my face.* I was getting this nightmare, and ones like it, with increasing frequency.

I wasn't superstitious. Okay, the series had a bizarre history that got stranger the deeper I dug; bad things dogged its owners — early graves, retirement to asylums, disappearances. And yeah, the one picture I had viewed gave me a creepy vibe. But I wasn't buying into any sort of

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paranormal explanation. I didn't believe in curses. I believed in alcoholism, drug addiction, and paranoid delusion. Put them in a shaker and you were bound to lose your marbles now and again.

Then one evening, while sifting Teddy's personal effects — going through the motions to get Jacob off my back — I found a dented ammo box. The box was stuffed with three decades' worth of photographs, although the majority were wartime shots.

Whenever he had a few drinks under his belt, Jacob was pleased to expound upon the grittier side of his favorite uncle. Jolly Saint Teddy had not always been a simple playboy multimillionaire. Oh, no, Teddy served in Vietnam as an intelligence officer; spooks, the boys called them. Predictable as taxes, really — he'd recently graduated from Dartmouth and there was a war on. A police action, if you wanted to get picky, but everybody knew what it was.

The snapshots were mainly of field hijinks with the troops and a few of Saigon R&R exploits. From what I could discern, when they were in the rear areas, all the intelligence guys dressed like Hollywood celebrities auditioning for a game show — tinted shooting glasses, Hawaiian shirts, frosty Coke bottles with teeny umbrellas at hand, a girl on each arm; the whole bit. Amusing, in a morbid sense. One of the field shots caught my attention and held it. It was not amusing in any sense.

The faded caption read, *Mekong D. 1967.* A platoon of marines decked out in full combat gear, mouths grinning in olive-black faces. Behind them were two men dressed in civilian clothes. I had no problem recognizing Anselm Thornton from Shep's portfolio, which included newspaper clippings, class albums from Texas A&M, and a jittery videotaped chronicle of the beatniks. Thornton's image was fuzzy — a pith helmet obscured his eyes, and a bulky, complicated camera was slung over one shoulder; sweat stains made half-moons under his armpits. Had he been with the press corps? No, the records didn't lie. During Nam, Thornton had been dropping LSD and poaching chicks outside of Candlestick Park.

Teddy, the old, exquisitely corpulent Teddy I knew, stood near him, incomprehensibly juxtaposed with these child-warriors. He wore a double-breasted suit a South American tailor had made recently. The suit restrained a once powerful frame sliding to blubber. Below a prominent brow, his face shone a mottled ivory; his eyes were sockets. His mouth

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gaped happily, smoldering with dust and cobwebs. A structure loomed beyond the marines. Screened by foliage, a battered marquee took shape. The marquee spelled AL D IN. The building was canted at an alarming angle; greasy smoke mushroomed from the roof.

That gave me pause. The Aladdin used to be Teddy's residence of choice when he visited Vegas. It was in a back room of that sacred hotel he once shook hands with his hero, the inestimable Dean Martin — who, in his opinion, was the better half of the Lewis & Martin act — during a high-stakes poker game reserved for the *crème de la crème* of big-shot gamblers. Teddy didn't qualify as a whale, as they referred to those suckers who routinely lost half a mil in one night, but he dropped his share of iron at the tables, and he always did have a knack for being at the heart of the action. I squinted at that photo until my eyes crossed — it was the Aladdin, no question. Yet an Aladdin even Teddy might not have recognized. Gray smudges in the windows were faces gazing down upon the razed jungle. Many of them were laughing or screaming.

I couldn't figure out what the hell I was seeing. I pawed through the box by the light of a Tiffany lamp while a strong winter rain bashed at the windows. More of the same; nearly three hundred pictures, all out of kilter, many in ways I never did quite understand. The latest seemed to contain medical imagery — some kind of surgery in progress. Overexposed, they formed a ruddy patina that was maddeningly obscure: Teddy's face streaked with blood as someone stitched his scalp in near darkness; coils of achromatic motion and pale hands with thick, dirty nails; a close-up of a wound, or a flower's corona; white, pink and black. It was impossible to identify the action.

I stopped looking after that, hedged around the issue with Jacob, asked him in an oblique way if his uncle might've known Thornton, during the halcyon days. Jacob was skeptical; he was certain such a fact would've come to light during Teddy's quest for the *Imago Sequence.* I didn't tell him about the ammo box; at that point it seemed wiser to keep my mouth shut. Either I was losing my sanity, or something else was happening. Regardless, the pattern around Jacob's inherited art piece was woven much tighter than I had suspected. The whole mess stank and I could only speculate how ripe it would become.

* * *

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3.

I DROVE TO BELLEVUE for an interview with Mrs. Florence Monson Chin, previous owner of *Parallax Alpha*. Her family had placed her in Grable, the best that money, a heap of money, could buy. Intimates referred to it as the Grable Hotel or Club Grable. These days, her presence there was an open secret thanks to the insatiable press. No matter; the hospital had a closed-doors policy and an iron fist in dealing with staff members who might choose to blab. Any news was old news.

Mrs. Chin was heiress to the estate of a naturalized Chinese businessman who'd made his fortune breeding rhesus monkeys for medical research. His associates called him the Monkey King. After her elderly husband passed on, Mrs. Chin resumed her debutante ways, club-hopping from Seattle to the French Riviera, screwing bullfighters, boxers, and a couple foreign dignitaries, snorting coke and buying abstract art — the more abstract, the more exquisitely provincial, the better. The folks at *Art News* didn't take her seriously as a collector, but it seemed a black AmEx card and a mean streak opened plenty of doors. She partied on the wild and wooly side of high society right up until she flipped her wig and got clapped in the funny farm.

I knew this because it was in all the tabloids. What I didn't know was if she would talk to me. Jacob made nice with her father, got me a direct line to her at the institution. She preferred to meet in person, but gave no indication she was particularly interested in discussing *Parallax Alpha*. She didn't sound too whacko on the phone, thank god.

Grable loomed at the terminus of a long gravel lane. Massive and Victorian, the institution had been freshly updated in tones of green and brown. The grounds were hemmed by a fieldstone wall and a spiral maze of orchards, parks, and vacant farmland. I'd picked a poor time of year to visit; everything was dead and moldering.

The staff oozed courtesy; it catered to a universally wealthy and powerful clientele. I might've looked like a schlep; nonetheless, far safer to kiss each and every ass that walked through the door. An androgynous receptionist processed my information, loaned me a visitor's tag and an escort named Hugo. Hugo deposited me in a cozy antechamber decorated with matching wicker chairs, an antique vase, prints of Mount Rainier and

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Puget Sound, and a worn Persian rug. The prints were remarkably cheap and crappy, in my humble opinion. Although I was far from an art critic. I favored statues over paintings any day. I twiddled my thumbs and pondered how the miracle of electroshock therapy had been replaced by cable television and self-help manuals. The wicker chair put a crick in my neck, so I paced.

Mrs. Chin sauntered in, dressed in a superfluous baby-blue sports bra with matching headband and chromatic spandex pants. Her face gleamed, stiff as a native death mask; her rangy frame reminded me of an adolescent mummy without the wrapper. I read in *Us* that she turned forty-five in the spring; her orange skin was speckled with plum-dark liver spots that formed clusters and constellations. She tested the air with predatory tongue-flicks. "Mr. Cortez, you are the most magnificently ugly man I have seen since Papa had our gardener deported to Argentina. Let me tell you what a shame that was."

"Hey, the light isn't doing you any favors either, lady," I said.

She went into her suite, left the door ajar. "Tea?" She rummaged through kitchen drawers. A faucet gurgled and then a microwave hummed.

"No thanks." I glanced around. It was similar to the antechamber, except more furniture and artwork — she liked O'Keeffe and Bosch. There were numerous oil paintings I didn't recognize; anonymous nature photographs, a Mayan calendar, and a smattering of southwestern pottery. She had a nice view of the grounds. Joggers trundled cobble paths; a peacock fan of pastel umbrellas cluttered the commons. The place definitely appeared more an English country club than a hospital. "Great digs, Mrs. Chin. I'm surprised they let you committed types handle sharp objects." I stood near a mahogany rolltop and played with a curved ceremonial knife that doubled as a paperweight.

"I'm rich. I do whatever I want." She returned with cups and a Tupperware dish of steaming water. "This isn't a prison, you know. Sit."

I sat across from her at a small table with a centerpiece of wilted geraniums and a fruit bowl containing a single overripe pear. A fat bluebottle fly crept about the weeping flesh of the pear.

Mrs. Chin crumbled green tea into china cups, added hot water, then honey from a stick with an expert motion, and leaned back without touching hers. "Hemorrhoids, Mr. Cortez?"

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"Excuse me?"

"You look uncomfortable."

"Uh, back trouble. Aches and pains galore from a misspent youth."

"Try shark cartilage. It's all the rage. I have a taste every day."

"Nummy. I'll pass. New Age health regimens don't grab me."

"Sharks grow new teeth," Mrs. Chin said. "Replacements. Teeth are a problem for humans — dentistry helps, but if an otherwise healthy man has them all removed, say because of thin enamel, he loses a decade, perhaps more. The jaw shortens, the mouth cavity shrinks, the brain is fooled. A general shutdown begins to occur. How much happier our lives would be, with the shark's simple restorative capability." This spooled from her tongue like an infomercial clip.

"Wow." I gave her an indulgent smile, took a cautious sip of tea. "You didn't slip any in here, did you?"

"No, my stash is far too expensive to waste on the likes of you, Mr. Cortez. Delightful name — are you a ruthless, modern-day conqueror? Did you come to ravish my secrets from me?"

"I'm a self-serving sonofabitch, if that counts for anything. I don't even speak Spanish. English will get you by in most places, and that's good enough for me. What secrets?"

"I'm a sex addict."

"Now that's not exactly a secret, is it?" It wasn't. Her exploits were legendary among the worldwide underground, as I had learned. She was fortunate to be alive. "How do they treat that, anyway?"

"Pills, buckets of pills. Diversion therapy. They replace negative things with positive things. They watch me — there are cameras everywhere in this building. Does the treatment work?" Here she winked theatrically. "I am permitted to exercise whenever I please. I love to exercise — endorphins keep me going."

"Sad stuff. Tell me about *Parallax Alpha*." I produced a notebook, uncapped a pen.

"Are you so confident that I will?" she said, amused.

"You're a lonely woman, I've a sympathetic ear. Consider it free counseling."

"Pretty. Very pretty. Papa had to sell a few of my things, balance the books. Did you acquire the photograph?"

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"A friend of mine. He wants me to find out more about it."

"You should tell your friend to go to hell."

"Really."

"Really." She picked up the pear, brushed the fly off, took a large bite. Juice glistened in her teeth, dripped from her chin. She dabbed it with a napkin. Very ladylike. "You don't have money, Mr. Cortez."

"I'm a pauper, it is true."

"Your friend has many uses for a man like you, I'm sure. Well, the history of the *Imago Sequence* is chock full of awful things befalling rich people. Does that interest you?"

"I'm not overly fond of the upper class. This is a favor."

"A big favor." Mrs. Chin took another huge bite, to accent the point. The lump traveled slowly down her throat — a pig disappearing into an anaconda. "I purchased *Parallax Alpha* on a lark at a seedy auction house in Mexico City. That was years ago; my husband was on his last legs — emphysema. The cigarette companies are making a killing in China. I was bored; a worldly stranger invited me to tour the galleries, take in a party. I didn't speak Spanish either, but my date knew the brokers, landed me a fair deal. The joke was on me, of course. My escort was a man named Anselm Thornton. Later, I learned of his connection to the series. You are aware that he owns the other two in the collection?"

"I am."

"They're bait. That's why he loans them to galleries, encourages people with lots of friends to buy them and put them on display."

"Bait?"

"Yes, bait. The photographs radiate a certain allure; they draw people like flies. He's always hunting for the sweetmeats." She chuckled ruefully. "I was sweet, but not quite sweet enough to end up in the fold. *Alpha* was mine, though. Not much later, I viewed *Beta*. By then the reaction, whatever it was, had started inside me, was consuming me, altering me in ways I could scarcely dream. I craved more. God, how I begged to see *Imago!* Anselm laughed — laughed, Mr. Cortez. He laughed and said that it was too early in the game for me to reintegrate. He also told me there's no *Imago*. No *Imago*, no El Dorado, no Santa Claus." Her eyes were hard and yellow. "The bastard was lying, though. *Imago* exists, perhaps not as a photograph. But it exists."

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"Reintegrate with what, Mrs. Chin?"

"He wouldn't elaborate. He said, 'We are born, we absorb, we are absorbed. Therein lies the function of all sentient beings.' It's a mantra of his. Anselm held that thought doesn't originate in the mind. Our brains are rather like meaty receivers. Isn't that a wild concept? Humans as nothing more than complicated sensors, or mayhap walking sponges. Such is the path to ultimate, libertine anarchy. And one might as well live it up, because there is no escape from the cycle, no circumvention of the ultimate, messy conclusion; in fact, it's already happened a trillion times over. The glacier is coming and no power will hold it in abeyance."

I didn't bother writing any of that down; I was plenty spooked before she came across with that booby-hatch monologue. I said, "It sounds like extremely convenient rationale for psychopathic behavior. He dumped you after your romp?"

"Frankly, I'm a lucky girl. Anselm deemed me more useful at large, spreading his influence. I brought *Parallax Alpha* stateside — that was the bargain, my part in the grand drama. Life went on."

"You got together in Mexico?"

"Yes. The resort threw a ball, a singles event, and Roy Fulcher made the introductions. Fulcher was a radical, a former chemist — Caltech, I believe. Struck me as a naturalist gone feral. A little bird informed me the CIA had him under surveillance — he seemed primed to blow something up, maybe spike a city reservoir. At the outset I suspected Fulcher was approaching me about funding for some leftist cause. People warned me about him. Not that I needed their advice. I had oodles of card-carrying revolutionaries buzzing in my hair at the time. Soon, I absolutely abhorred the notion of traveling in Latin America. Fuck the guerillas, fuck the republic, I just want a margarita. Fulcher wasn't after cash, though. He was Anselm's closest friend. A disciple."

"Disciple, gotcha." I scribbled it in my trusty notebook. "What's Thornton call his philosophy? Cultist Christianity? Rogue Buddhism? Crystal worship? What's he into?"

She smiled, stretched, and tossed the remains of her fruit in a waste basket shaped like an elephant foot. "Anselm's into pleasure. I think it fair to designate him the reigning king of sybarites. I was moderately wicked

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when I met him. He finished me off. Go mucking about his business and he'll do for you too."

"Right. He's Satan, then. How did he ruin you, Mrs. Chin? Did he hook you on drugs, sex, or both?"

Her smile withered. "Satan may not exist, but Anselm surely does. Drugs were never the issue. I could always take them or leave them, and it's more profound than sex. I speak of a different thing entirely. There exists a quality of corruption you would not be familiar with — not on the level or to the degree that I have seen, have lived." She stopped, studied me. Her yellow eyes brightened. "Or, I'm mistaken. Did you enjoy it? Did you enjoy looking at *Parallax Alpha*? That's the first sign. It's a special person who does; the kind Anselm drools over."

"No, Mrs. Chin. I think it sucks."

"It frightened you. Poor baby. And why not? There are things to be frightened of in that picture. Enlightenment isn't necessarily a clean process. Enlightenment can be filthy, degenerate, dangerous. Enlightenment is its own reward, its own punishment. You begin to see so much more. And so much more sees you."

I said, "I take it this was in the late eighties, when you met Thornton? Rumor has it he's a hermit. Not much of a high-society player. Yet you say he was in Mexico, doing the playboy shtick."

"Even trapdoor spiders emerge from their lairs. Anselm travels in circles that will not publicize his movements."

"How would I go about contacting him? Maybe get things from the horse's mouth."

"We're not in touch. But those who wish to find him...find him. Be certain you wish to find him, Mr. Cortez."

"Okay. What about Fulcher? Do you know where he is?"

"Oh, ick. Creepy fellow. I pretended he didn't exist, I'm afraid."

"Thanks for your time, Mrs. Chin. And the tea." I started to rise.

"No more questions?"

"I'm fresh out, Mrs. Chin."

"Wait, if you please. There's a final item I'd like to show you." She went away and returned with a slim photo album. She pushed it across the table and watched me with a lizard smile to match her lizard eyes. "Can I trust you, Mr. Cortez?"

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I shrugged.

She spoke softly. "The staff censors my mail, examines my belongings. There are periodic inspections. Backsliding will not be tolerated. They don't know about these. These are of my vacation in Mexico; a present from Anselm. Fulcher took them from the rafters of the cathedral. Go on, open it."

I did. There weren't many photos and I had to study them closely because each was a section of a larger whole. The cathedral must've been huge; an ancient vault lit by torches and lanterns. Obviously Fulcher had taken pains to get the sequence right — Mrs. Chin instructed me to remove eight of them from the protective plastic, place them in order on the table. An image took root and unfolded. A strange carpet, stained rose and peach, spread across shadowy counterchange tiles, snaked around immense gothic pillars and statuary. The carpet gleamed and blurred in patches, as if it were a living thing.

"That's me right about there," Mrs. Chin tapped the third photo from the top. "Thrilling, to enact the writhing of the Ouroboros!"

"Jesus Christ," I muttered. At least a thousand people coupled upon the cathedral floor. A great, quaking mass of oiled flesh, immortalized by Fulcher's lens. "Why did you show me this?" I looked away from the pictures and caught her smile, cruel as barbed wire. There was my answer. The institution was powerless to eradicate *all* of her pleasures.

"Good-bye, Mr. Cortez. Good-bye, now."

Leaving, I noticed another overripe pear in the fruit bowl, as if Mrs. Chin had replaced it by sleight of hand. A fly sat atop, rubbing its legs together, wearing my image in its prism eyes.

I wasn't feeling well.

I awoke at 2 A.M., slick and trembling, from yet another nightmare. My head roared with blood. I rose, trying to avoid disturbing Carol, who slept with her arm shielding her eyes, my dog-eared copy of *The Prince* clutched in her fingers. I staggered into the kitchen for a handful of aspirin and a glass of cold milk. There was a beer left over from dinner, so I drank that too. It was while standing there, washed in the unearthly radiance of the refrigerator light, that I realized the orgy in Mrs. Chin's

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photographs had been orchestrated to achieve a specific configuration. The monumental daisy chain made a nearly perfect double helix.

4.

IN THE MIDDLE of January I decided to cruise down to San Francisco and spend a weekend beating the bushes.

I met Jacob for early dinner on the waterfront at an upscale grill called The Marlin. Back in the day, Teddy treated us there when he was being especially avuncular, although he had preferred to hang around the yacht club or fly to Seattle, where his cronies played. Jacob handed me the Weston Gallery's business card and a roll of cash for expenses. We didn't discuss figures for Thornton's successful interrogation. The envelope would be fat and the goodwill of a wealthy, bored man would continue to flow freely. Nor did he question my sudden eagerness to locate the hermit art collector. Still, he must have noticed the damage to my appearance that suggested worse than a simple New Year's bender.

Following dinner, I drove out in the country to a farmhouse near Yelm for tequila and cigars with Earl Hutchinson, a buddy of mine since high school. He'd been a small, tough kid from Iowa; a so-called bad seed. He looked the part: slicked hair, switchblade in his sock, a cigarette behind his ear, a way of standing that suggested trouble. Hutch hadn't changed, only drank a little more and got harder around the eyes.

We relaxed on the porch; it was a decent night with icy stars sprinkled among the gaps. Hutch was an entrepreneur; while I was away in college he hooked up in the arms trade — he'd served as an artillery specialist in the Army, forged connections within the underbelly of America's war machine. He amassed an impressive stockpile before the anti-assault weapon laws put the kibosh on legal sales; there were dozens of AK-47s, M16s, and Uzis buried in the pasture behind his house. I'd helped him dig.

These days it was guard dogs. He trained shepherds for security, did a comfortable business with local companies. I noticed his kennels were empty except for a brood bitch named Gerta and some pups. Hutch said demand was brisk, what with the rise of terrorism and the sagging economy. Burglaries always spiked during recessions. Eventually the

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conversation swung around to my California trip. He walked into the house, came out with a .357 and a box of shells. I peeled four hundred bucks from my brand new roll, watched him press the bills into his shirt pocket. Hutch poured more tequila and we finished our cigars, reminiscing about happy times. Lied about shit, mainly.

I went home and packed a suitcase from college, bringing the essentials — winter clothes, pain pills, toiletries. I watered the plants and left a terse message on Carol's answering service. She'd flown to Spokane to visit her mother. She generally found a good reason to bug out for the high country when I got piss-drunk and prowled the apartment like a bear with a toothache.

I told her I'd be gone for a few days, feed the fish. Then I headed south.

The truth is, I volunteered for the California job to see the rest of the *Imago Sequence*. As if viewing the first had not done ample harm. In addition to solving Teddy's vanishing act, I meant to ask Thornton some questions of my own.

I attempted to drive through the night. Tough sledding — my back knotted from hunching behind the wheel. A dose of vicodin had no effect. I needed sleep. Unfortunately, the prospect of dreaming scared the hell out of me.

I drove as long as my nerve held. Not fast, but methodically as a nail sinking into heartwood, popping Yellowjackets and blasting the radio. In the end the pain beat me down. I took a short detour on a dirt road and rented a motel room south of Redding. I tried to catch a couple hours of rest. It was a terrible idea.

Parallax Alpha ate its way into my dreams again.

The motel ceiling jiggled, tapioca pudding with stars revolving in its depths. The blackened figure at *Parallax Alpha*'s center seeped forth. I opened my mouth, but my mouth was already a rictus. The ceiling swallowed me, bones and all.

— I squatted in a cavernous vault, chilled despite the rank, humid darkness pressing my flesh. Stench burrowed into my nose and throat. Maggots, green meat, rotten bone. Thick, sloppy noises, as wet rope smacking rock drew closer. A cow gave birth, an eruption. The calf mewled — blind, terrified. Old, old water dripped. An army of roaches

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began to march; a battalion of worms plowed into a mountain of offal; the frenetic drone of flies in glass, an embryonic bulk uncoiling in its cyst —

I awakened, muscles twitching in metronome to the shuttering numbers of the radio clock. Since Christmas, my longest stretch of uninterrupted sleep was three hours and change. I almost relished the notion of a grapeshot tumor gestating in my brain as the source of all that was evil. It didn't wash; too easy. So said my puckered balls, the bunched hackles of my neck. Paleontologists, anthropologists, ordained priests, or who-the-hell-ever could debate the authenticity of Ammon's handiwork until the cows came home. My clenched guts and arrhythmic heart harbored no doubt that he had snapped a photo of someone or something truly unpleasant. Worse, I couldn't shake the feeling that Mrs. Chin was correct: it had looked right back at me. It was looking for me now.

I got on the road; left a red fantail of dust hanging.

Midmorning crawled over the Frisco skyline, gin blossom clouds piling upon the bay. I drove to the address on the card, a homely warehouse across from a Mexican restaurant and a mortgage office that had been victimized by graffiti artists, and parked in the alley. Inside the warehouse were glass walls and blue shadows broken by giant ferns.

I lifted a brochure from a kiosk in the foyer; a slick, multicolored pamphlet with headshots of the director and his chief cronies. I slipped it into my blazer pocket and forged ahead. The lady behind the front desk wore a prison-orange jumpsuit. Her hair was pulled back so tightly it forced her to smile when she shook my hand. I asked for Director Stanley Renfro and was informed that Mr. Renfro was on vacation.

Could I please speak to the acting director? She motioned me beyond shadowbox panels to the rear of the gallery where a crew of Hispanic and Vietnamese day laborers sweated to dismantle an installation of a scale city park complete with fiberglass fruit trees, benches, and a working gothic fountain. I picked my way across the mess of tarps, coax, and sawdust. Motes hung in the too-bright wash of stage lights. A Teutonic symphony shrilled counterpoint to arc welders.

Acting director Clarke was a lanky man with a spade-shaped face. A serious whitebread bastard with no interest in fielding questions about Thornton or his photograph. Clarke was sated with the power rush of his

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new executive position; I sensed I wouldn't be able to slip him a few bills to grease the rails and I'd already decided to save breaking his head as a last resort.

I used charm, opening with a throwaway remark about the genius of Maurice Ammon.

Clarke gave my haggard, sloppy self the once-over. "Ammon was a hack." His eyes slightly crossed and he talked like a man punching typewriter keys. "Topless native women suckling their babies; bone-through-the-nose savages leaning on spears. Tourist swill. His specialty."

"Yeah? Don't tell me the Weston Gallery is in the business of showcasing hacks?"

"We feature only the highest caliber work." Clarke paused to drone pidgin Spanish at one of the laborers. When he looked up at me again his sneer hardened. "I dislike the *Imago Sequence*. But one cannot deny its...resonance. Ammon got lucky. Doesn't overcome a portfolio of mediocrity."

No, he didn't like the series at all. I read that plainly from the brief bulge of his eyes similar to a horse getting a whiff of smoke for the first time. The reaction seemed reasonable. "A three-hit wonder." I tried to sound amiable.

It was wasted. "Are you a cop, Mr. Cortez?"

"What, I look like a cop to you?"

"Most citizens don't have so many busted knuckles. A private eye, then."

"I'm a tourist. Do you think Ammon actually photographed a fossilized caveman?"

"That's absurd. The so-called figures are geological formations. Ask the experts."

"Wish I had nothing else to do with my life. You don't buy it, eh?"

"The hominid theory is titillation." He smirked. "It does sell tickets."

"He got bored with native titties and went for abstract art? Sure looks like a troglodyte to me."

"Well, pardon my saying you don't know squat about photography and I think you're here on bad business. Did the toad send you?"

I chuckled. "You've met Teddy."

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"Never had the pleasure. I saw him in September, sniffing around the photo, practically wetting his pants. Figured he was trying to collect the set. I'll tell *you* exactly what Renfro told *him*: *Parallax Beta* is not for sale and its owner is not interested in discussing the matter."

"Renfro said that to Teddy, did he? Seems I'm chasing my tail then." He had said what I hoped to hear. "By the way, where did Mr. Renfro go for his vacation? Somewhere warm, I hope."

Clarke's sneer broadened. "He's on sabbatical." From the pleasure in his tone he did not expect his former patron to return.

"Well, thanks for your time."

"Adios, Mr. Cortez. Since you came for a peek at *Parallax Beta*, stop by the Natural History display."

"Blessings to you and your children, Herr Director." I went where he pointed, trying to act casual. The prospect of viewing the second photograph filled me with elation and dread. There it was, hanging between the Grand Tetons and the caldera of slumbering Mt. Saint Helens.

Parallax Beta was the same photograph as *Alpha*, magnified tenfold. The amber background had acquired a coarser quality; its attendant clots and scars were more distinct, yet more distinctly ambiguous. They congealed to form asteroid belts, bell-shaped celestial gases, volcanic moons. The hominid's howling mouth encompassed the majority of the picture. It seemed capable of biting off my head, of blasting my eardrums with its guttural scream.

My vision tunneled and I tore myself away with the convulsive reflex of a man awakened from a dream of falling. *Panpipes, clashing cymbals, strobes of meteoric rain. Dogs snarling, a bleating goat. Buzzing flies, worms snuggling in musty soil.* All faded as I lurched away, routed from the field.

I made it to the lobby and drank from the water fountain, splashing my face until the floor stopped tilting. The lady in the jumpsuit perched behind her desk, vulture-talons poised near the phone. She extended another wintry smile as I retreated from the building into the hard white glare.

Eleven A.M. and next to zero accomplished, which meant I was basically on schedule. I was an amateur kneecap man, not a P.I. My local connections were limited to a bookie, a sports agent who might or might

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not be under indictment for money laundering, and the owner of a modest chain of gymnasiums. I adjourned to a biker grill called the Hog and downed several weak Bloody Marys with a basket of deep-fried oysters. The lunch crowd consisted of two leathery old-timers sipping draft beer, their Harley Davidson knockoffs parked on the curb; a brutish man in a wife-beater T-shirt at the bar doing his taxes on a short form; and the bartender who had so much pomade in his hair it gleamed like a steel helmet. The geriatric bikers were sniping over the big N.F.C. championship game coming up between the Niners and the Cowboys.

Between drinks, I borrowed the bartender's ratty phonebook. Half the pages were ripped out, but I found a listing for S. Renfro, which improved my mood for about three seconds. I tried ringing him from the pay phone next to the men's room. A recorded message declared that the number was not in service, please try again. Following Hog tradition, I tore out the page and saved it for later.

I called Jacob collect. After he accepted charges, I said, "Were you around Teddy before he disappeared?"

"Eh? We've been over this."

"Be nice, I'm slow."

Several static-laden beats passed. Then, "Um, not so much. Teddy's always been secretive, though."

"Okay, was he *more* or *less* secretive those last few weeks?"

He coughed in a phlegmy way that suggested I had prodded him from the slumber of the indolent rich. "I don't know, Marv. I got used to him sneaking around. What's going on?"

"I haven't figured that out yet. Did his habits change? And I mean even an iota."

"No — wait. He dressed oddly. Yeah. Well, more than usual, if you want to split hairs."

"I'm listening."

"Give me a sec...." Jacob cursed, knocked something off a shelf, cursed again. A metallic snick was followed by a scratchy drag into the receiver. "He wore winter clothes a lot at the end. Inside, too, the few times I saw him. You know — sock cap, mackinaw, and boots. He looked like a Canadian longshoreman. Said he was cold. But, what's that? Teddy dressed for safari half the time. He was eccentric."

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"Thin blood. Too many years in the tropics," I said.

"You have anything yet?"

"Nope. I'm just trying to cover all the bases." I wondered if dear, departed Theodore had suffered night sweats, if he had ever lain in bed staring at a maw of darkness that grinned toothless as a sphincter. I wondered if Jacob did.

Jacob said, "You don't think he was mixing with a rough element, right?"

"Probably not. He was going batty, fell into the drink. Stuff like this happens to seniors. They find them wandering around race tracks or shopping malls. Happens every day."

"Keep digging anyway."

"I'll hit you back when I find more. Bye, bye." I broke the connection, rubbed sweat from my cheek. I needed a shave.

The last call was to my bookie friend. I took the Cowboys and the points because I hoped to counter the growing sense of inevitability hanging over my head like Damocles's least favorite pig sticker. Come Sunday night I owed the bookie five hundred bucks.

5.

STANLEY RENFRO'S house drank the late afternoon glow. Far from imposing, as I had half expected, simply one of many brick and timber colonials bunkered in the surrounding hills. It was painted in conservative tones and set back from the street, windows blank. A blue sedan was parked in the drive, splattered with enough seagull shit to make me suspect it hadn't moved lately. Half a dozen rolled newspapers decomposed on the shaggy lawn. The grass was shin-high and climbing.

I did not want to walk up the block and enter that house.

My belly churned with indigestion. A scream had recently interrupted my fitful doze. This scream devolved into the dwindling complaints of a bus horn. Minutes later when the sodium lamps caught fire and Renfro's house remained black, I decided he was dead.

This leap of intuition could not be proved by yellow papers or flourishing weeds. *Nah, the illustrious director might be taking a nap. No*

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need to turn the lights on. Maybe he's not even inside. Maybe he's in Borneo stealing objets d'art *from the natives. He left his car because a crony gave him a lift to the airport. He forgot to cancel the newspaper. Somebody else forgot to cut the grass.* Sure. The house reminded me of a corpse that hadn't quite begun to fester. I retrieved a flashlight from the glove compartment. Thick, and made of steel, like cops use. It felt nice in my hand.

I climbed from the Chrysler, leaned against the frame until my neck loosened and I could rotate my head without catching a fireworks show. No one appeared to notice when I hiked through Renfro's yard, although a small dog barked nearby. The alarm system was cake — since it was predicated on pressure, all I needed to do was smash a kitchen window and climb through without disturbing the frame. This turned out to be unnecessary. The power was down and the alarm's emergency battery had died.

The kitchen smelled foul despite its antiseptic appearance. Street light spread my shadow into monstrous proportions. Water drooled around the base of the refrigerator. Distant traffic vibrated china in its cabinet. Everything reeked of mildew and decaying fruit.

I clicked on the flashlight as I proceeded deeper into the house. The ceilings were low. I determined within a few steps that the man was a bachelor. That relieved me. Beyond the kitchen, a narrow hall of dusky paneling absorbed my light beam. The décor was not extraordinary considering it belonged to the director of an art gallery — obscure oil paintings, antique vases, and ceramic sculptures. Undoubtedly the truly expensive bric-a-brac was stashed in a safe or strong room. I didn't care about that; I was hunting for a name, a name certain to be scribbled in Renfro's personal files.

The shipwrecked living room was a blow to my composure. However, even before I entered that demolished area, my wind was up. I felt as a man tiptoeing through a diorama blown to life size. As if the outer reaches of the house were a façade that had not quite encompassed the yard.

Mr. Renfro had been on a working vacation, by the evidence. Mounds of wet dirt were heaped around a crater. Uprooted boards lay in haphazard stacks. Sawed joists gleamed like exposed ribs. The pit was deep and ugly — a cavity. I turned away and released a sluice of vodka, tomato juice, and oyster chunks. Purged, I felt better than I had in days.

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I skirted the destruction, mounted the stairs to the second floor. Naked footprints scarred the carpet, merging into a muddy path — the trail a beast might pound with its blundering mass. If Renfro made the prints, I figured him for around six feet, two hundred forty. Not quite in my league, but hefty enough that I was happy to grip the sturdy flashlight. A metal bucket was discarded on the landing. Inside the upper bathroom, the clawfoot tub had cracked, overflowing dirt and nails. The sink was shattered. Symbols had been scrawled above the toilet with mud, but the flowery paper hung in shreds. I deciphered the letters MAG and MMON. A cockroach clambered up the wall, fell, started again. Its giant, horned silhouette crossed mine. I didn't linger.

I peeked in the master bedroom to be thorough. It too was victim of hurricane savagery. The bed was stripped, sheets wadded on the floor amid drifts of clothes. A set of designer luggage had barely survived; buckles and zippers sprung, meticulously packed articles disgorged like intestines. I got the distinct impression Renfro had planned a trip before whatever happened, happened.

Renfro had converted the spare bedroom to an office. Here were toppled oak file cabinets, contents strewn and stomped. My prize was a semi-collapsed desk, buried in a landslide of paper. Its sides bore gouges and impact marks. Thankfully Renfro hadn't filled this room with dirt. I searched for his Rolodex amid the chaos, keeping an eye on the door. The house was empty, obviously the house was empty. Renfro wasn't likely to be lurking in a closet. He wasn't likely to come shambling into the office, caked with mud and blood and fondling a hatchet. I still kept an eye on the door.

A drawer contained more file hangers. Inside the R-T folder was an index card with A. THORNTON *(Imago Colony)* written in precise block letters, a Purdon address which was probably a drop box, a list of names that meant nothing to me, and an unmarked cassette tape. Actually the label had been smudged. I stuck the card and the tape in my pocket. On impulse I checked the W's and found a listing for T.WILSON. *Parallax Alpha* was penned in the margin. Below that, in fresher ink — *Provender*?

Mission accomplished, I was eager to saddle up and get the hell out of Tombstone. Then my light illuminated the edge of a wrinkled photograph of Stanford lacrosse players assembled on a field. A dated shot, but I

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recognized a younger Renfro from the brochure in my pocket. He knelt front and center, sporting a permed Afro and a butterfly collar. His eyes and mouth were holes. They reminded me of how Teddy's mouth looked in his war pictures. They also reminded me of the pit Renfro had excavated in his living room. Behind the team, where campus buildings should logically be, reared the basalt ridge of a mountain. A flinty spine wreathed by primordial steam.

This was Teddy's photo collection redux. And there were more delights. I considered vomiting again.

I stared for a bit, turning the photo this way and that. Concentration was difficult, because my fingers shook. I sorted the papers again, including the pile on the floor, examining the various photographs and postcards that were salted through the general mess. Some framed, some not. Wallet-sized to the kind Grandma hangs above the mantle. This time I actually *looked* and beheld a pattern that my subconscious had recognized already. Each picture was warped, each was distorted. Each was a fake, a fabrication designed to unnerve the viewer. What other purpose could they serve?

I checked for splice marks, hints of computer grafting, as if my untrained eye could've helped. Nothing to explain the mechanics of the hoax. The terrain was wrong in all of these. Very wrong. The sky was not quite the same sky we walked around under every day. No, the sky in the more peculiar photos appeared somewhat viscous with bubbles and spot discoloration — the sky was a solid. As a matter of fact, it kind of resembled amber. Shapes that might've been blimps hovered at the periphery, pressed against the fabric of the sky.

This was enough spooky bullshit for me. I beat feet.

Downstairs, I hesitated at the pit. I shined my lonely beam into the gloom. It was about twelve feet deep; the sides crumbled and seeped groundwater. A nasty thought had been ticking in my brain. *Where is Renfro? In the hole, of course.*

Which suggested he was hiding — *or lying in wait.* I didn't actually want to find him either way. Thornton's information was in my pocket. Assuming it panned out, there were many hours of driving ahead. But the nasty thought was ticking louder, getting closer. *Why is Renfro digging a hole under his very nice house? Wow, I wonder if it's related to his*

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screwed up picture collection? And, oh, do you think it has anything to do with a certain photograph on loan to his precious gallery? Do you suppose he spent long, long hours in front of that picture, fixated, neglecting his duties until his people sent him on a little vacation? Don't call us, we'll call you.

There was a lot of debris at the bottom of that hole. A lot of debris and the light was dimming as its batteries gave up the ghost and I couldn't be one hundred percent sure, but I glimpsed an earthen lump down there, right where the darkness thickened. A man-sized lump. At its head was a damp depression in which a small object glinted. When I hit it with the light, it flickered. Blinked, blinked.

6.

I WANTED TO TURN around and bolt for home, get back to my beer and cartoons. I headed for Purdon instead. A Mastodon sinking in a tar pit.

Purdon was a failed mill town several hours northeast of San Francisco — victim of the rise of environmentalism in the latter '90s. A mountainous region bracketed by a national park and a reservation. Rural and impoverished as all hell. Plenty of pot plantations, militia compounds, and dead mining camps; all of it crisscrossed with a few thousand miles of logging roads slowly being eaten by forest. An easy place to vanish from the planet.

My mind had been switched off for the last hundred miles.

I switched it off because I was tired of thinking about the events at Renfro's house. Tired of considering the implications. It occurred to me, not for the first time, that I had fallen down the rabbit hole and would awaken at any moment. Unfortunately, I had brought a couple of the suspect photos and they remained steadfastly bizarre. Combined with Teddy's, did this not suggest a supernatural force at work?

Thoughts like that are why I shut my mind off.

Better to stick with problems at hand. Problems such as motoring into the sticks looking for a man I had seen in ancient clippings and a jerky movie frame shot three decades prior. A man who was probably a certifiable lunatic if he had owned the *Imago Sequence* for so many years.

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Whether he might know the whereabouts of a petrified hominid, or the truth about the disappearance of a thoroughly modern human, no longer seemed important. The only matter of importance was finding a way to kill the nightmares. And if Thornton couldn't help me? Best not to scrutinize that possibility too closely. I could almost taste the cold, oily barrel of my revolver.

I played Renfro's tape. The recording was damaged — portions were garbled, others were missing entirely, comprised of clicking and deep sea warbles. The intelligible segments featured a male lecturer. " — *satiation is the natural inclination. One is likely to spend centuries glutting primitive appetites, wreaking havoc on enemies, and so forth. What then? That depends on the personality. Few would seek the godhead, I think. Such a pursuit would require tremendous imagination, determination...resources. Provender would be an issue. It is difficult to conceive the acquisition of so much ripe flesh. No, the majority will be content with leisurely hedonism* — "

The Chrysler groaned as it climbed. Night paled and the rain slackened into gray drizzle. Big hills, big trees, everything dripping and foggy. Signs grew sparse and the road fell apart. I had to pay attention lest my car be hurled into a ravine.

" — *consumption of accelerated brainmatter being one proven catalyst. Immersion in a protyle sink is significantly more efficacious, albeit infinitely more perilous. Best avoided.*" Laughter. The recording petered to static.

I reached Purdon in time for church. Instead, I filled my tank at the Union 76 next to the defunct lumber mill, washed and changed clothes in the cramped bathroom. At the liquor store I bought a bottle of cheap whiskey. Here was my indemnity from coming nightmares. Then I ate a huge breakfast at the Hardpan Café. The waitress, who might also have been the proprietor, was a shrewd-eyed Russian. There were a lot of Russian immigrants in the area, I discovered. She didn't care for my looks, but she kept my coffee cup level and her thoughts to herself while I stared out the window and plotted my next move.

Not much to see — narrow streets crowded with warped 1920s salt box houses. FOR LEASE signs plastered dark windows. A few people, mostly hungover men, prowled the sidewalks. Everybody appeared to

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wear flannel and drive dented pickups. Most of the trucks had full gun racks.

I asked the Russian woman about finding a room and was directed to the Pine Valley Motel, which was less lovely than it sounded — unless you were thinking pine box, and then, yeah, that was more accurate, in an esthetic sense. The motel sprawled in a gravel lot at the edge of town, northernmost wing gutted by a recent fire and draped with rust-stained tarps. Mine was the sole car parked in front.

A stoic senior citizen missing two fingers of his right hand took my money and produced the key. His stained ballcap read: PURDON MILL — AN AMERICAN COMPANY! For fun, I asked if he knew anything about Anselm Thornton or the Imago Colony and received a glassy stare as he honked his nose into a handkerchief.

The walls of No. 32 were balsa-thin and the bed creaked ominously, but I didn't see any cockroaches. I counted myself lucky as I cracked the seal on the whiskey. I made it to within a pinky of the bottom before the curtain dropped.

Ants.

I shared a picnic with a woman who was the composite of several women, all of them attractive, all of them wanton yet motherly, like the new Betty Crocker. She spoke words that held no weight and so fluttered away on the breeze with a vapor trail of pollen. Our feast was laid upon the requisite checkerboard blanket beneath a flowering tree with the grass and the sun and all that. With all that and the chirping birds and the painfully blue sky and the goddamned ants; I didn't notice the ants until the woman held a slice of bread to my lips and as I opened my mouth to accept the bread I saw an ant trapped in the honey. Too late, my mouth closed and I swallowed and I looked down and beheld them everywhere upon the checker cloth, these ants. Formicating. I rose up, a behemoth enraged, and trampled them in shallow puffs of dust. They died in their numbers, complaining in small voices as their works were conculcated — their wagon trains and caravans, their miniature Hippodromes and coliseums, their monuments and toy superstructures, all crashed, all toppled, all ablaze. I threw my head back to bellow curses and noticed the sun had become a pinhole. The hole openedopenedopened —

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* * *

Open.

I stared at the ceiling and realized that I now slept with my eyes wide and glazed. Marbles, the last of my marbles.

Shadows flowed swiftly along the decrepit wallpaper of No. 32, shrinking from the muzzy glare of the sun as it wallowed behind clouds. The thermostat was set at body temperature and the room steamed. I didn't recall waking to do that. I had slept for eighteen hours. *Eighteen hours!* It was a bloody miracle! I dressed, avoiding the mirror.

There were various stratagems available, a couple of them clever. I wasn't feeling clever, though. In fact, my skull felt like a pot of mush.

I flashed a snapshot of Teddy at the locals, finally got a bite from the mechanic at the gas station. He remembered Teddy from the previous September — *Heavy guy, yeah; drivin' a foreign car, passin' through. North, I suppose, 'cause he asked where Little Egypt was. We get that a lot. Tourists want to fool around the mines. Ain't shit-all left, though. I checked his brakes — these roads are hell on brakes. He paid cash.*

No surprises, the jigsaw was taking its form.

I measured the dwindling girth of my money clip and dealt a portion of it to Rod, the pimply badger of a clerk at the post office. It went down smoothly after I told him I was working for a family who believed their baby girl had joined a cult. Oh, this sweaty, mutton-chopped fellow became a regular Samaritan once the folding green was in his pocket. He came across with the goods — names and descriptions of the people who regularly accessed Thornton's box. He'd never seen Thornton, didn't know much about him and didn't want to. The Imago Colony? Zip. Thornton's group numbered about forty, although who knew? — what with tourist season and the influx of visitors come spring. They occupied mining claims somewhere on Little Egypt; kept to themselves. Mormons, or some shit. Weird folk, but nobody had heard about them causing trouble before. He let me look at a topographical map that showed Little Egypt was, in fact, a sizable chunk of real estate. Thornton's camp could be any one of a dozen claims scattered throughout the area. I slipped him another fifty bucks to keep mum about our conversation.

Satisfied, I retreated to the Hardpan Café, which commanded an

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unobstructed view of the post office. I settled in to wait for my hippie friends to make the scene. The Russian lady was overjoyed.

Thornton's people arrived on Thursday. Two rough men dressed in greatcoats; they drove around town in a clanking two-ton truck with a canvas top. A military surplus vehicle capable of serious off-road travel. The U.S Army Star was mud-splattered.

I compared them to my list. One, a redhead, was a nobody. The other man was middling sized, with a dented forehead, pebbly eyes and a long beard that would've made Fidel Castro jealous. Roy Fulcher, larger and uglier than life. Still playing henchman to Thornton in the new century. Loyal as a dog; how sweet.

If any of the locals tipped the men that I had been asking about their operation, it was not evident. They nonchalantly gathered supplies while I lurked in the background. Toward evening Fulcher pointed the truck north and rumbled off with a load of dry goods, fuel, and mail. I trailed.

Eventually, the truck turned onto a gravel road. A bullet-riddled sign read: LITTLE EGYPT RD. The metal pole was bent nearly double, victim of unknown violence. Rough country here; patches of concrete-hard snow gleamed under scraggly trees. In a few miles gravel gave way to a mud track and the ruts were too deep for the Chrysler. I pulled over, shouldered a satchel I'd bought at the Purdon Thrifty Saver and started walking, carefully picking my way as twilight grew moss and the stars glittered like caltrops. As the air cooled, mist cloaked the branches and brambles.

The hills got steep fast, draining the strength from my legs. My back protested. I shook most of the bottle of aspirin into my mouth to stay on the safe side, and rested frequently. When the track forked, I shined my flashlight to orient on the freshest ruts. It wasn't difficult; it was like following a bulldozer up the mountain. I clicked the light off quickly, hoping to conceal my position, and continued trudging.

I checked my watch to gauge the mileage and discovered it had died at 6:32 P.M. Much later, my legs got too heavy and I slumped under a lonely pine. Clouds snuffed the stars.

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7.

THE GRAY LIGHT swam as it brightened; rocks and brush solidified all around. Two inches of snow dusted the landscape like the face of a corpse.

My back had seized up. It hurt in a profound way. *Like a bitch*, as my pop would've said. The aspirin was gone, the whiskey too. It seemed impossible that I would ever stand. But I rose, among a shower of black motes and silvery comets. Rose with the chuffing sob of a steer as it is goaded onto the gangway. Then I hugged my homely little tree, pissed on my boots and trembled with nausea. I needed a drink.

The road curved upward in a series of switchbacks. The snow disintegrated to brown sludge. I staggered along the shoulder, avoiding the quagmire. My feet got wet anyway. I clutched at exposed roots and outcroppings. A bird scolded me.

Cresting a saddle in the hills, I gazed upon the flank of a mountain about a quarter-mile off. Shacks were scattered beneath the crags — tin roofs bled orange tracks in the snow. The truck Fulcher had driven was parked alongside two battered jeeps near a Quonset hut. Wood smoke coiled above the camp, chugged forth from several stacks. A knot of muddy pigs huddled in a paddock. Nothing else moved.

My glance fell upon a trio of silhouetted formations farther along the mountainside; too far to discern clearly. Pylons? The instant I spotted them a whisper of unease urged me to look elsewhere. To flee, yes. I patted the bulk of the revolver in my pocket and the whispers slithered away.

I gulped air and wished I'd thought to bring field glasses for this expedition. Keeping to the brush, I swung a wide northwest circle. As I drew closer to the pylons, it registered that about a dozen jutted randomly above the stony field. Crows danced atop them, squawking their hideous argot. An unpleasant sensation of primitive familiarity rooted me in my tracks. The objects were made of milled poles planted at angles like king-sized X's, each twice the height of a man. Symbols were carved into them. Latin? The farthest structure had something caught at its apex — a bundle of rags.

"Marvin!"

I turned. A man in a billowing poncho strode from the direction of the

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camp. He waved and I waved back automatically. The brush must not have concealed me so well after all. He walked swiftly, a stop-motion figure on grainy film. The haze had a spaghetti-western effect — it made him taller and shorter by turns and cast his face in gloom.

"Mr. Thornton?" I said when he halted before me. God, he was tall. I was no midget and I had to crane my neck at him.

"Welcome to the Pleasure Dome. Glad you could make it. We seldom receive visitors during the winter season." He sounded British and wore an Australian-style drover's hat pulled low over jagged brows and scaly eyes. Potbellied and thick through the hips, yet gangly and muscular the way a well-fed raptor is muscular. His enormous hands hung loosely. A thin-lipped mouth threatened to bisect his broad, sallow face. Lots and lots of stained crooked teeth were revealed by his huge smile. "It has you, I see. Ticktock go the mitochondria — a nova in bloom. Marvelous, marvelous."

I stared at him and decided he was far too spry for a fellow pushing seventy-five. His movements were quick and powerful. His doll-smooth flesh radiated youthful heat. "Who told you I was coming?" I suspected someone at the Weston Gallery had phoned with the news. Were there phones up here?

Thornton hesitated as if he actually meant to answer the question. "Come back to the house. The ground is unsafe."

"Unsafe how?"

"Not all the shafts are properly sealed. Holes everywhere. Periodically someone disappears — they come poking around for souvenirs or gold and...well, one misstep is all it takes. Teenagers, usually. Or tourists."

I nodded in idiot silence, grappling with my instincts — my mind was a cacophony of ghostly exhortations to rap this man's head while we were away from his presumed horde of disciples, to put him on his knees with the gun barrel under his jaw and pry loose the answers to a dozen pertinent questions. I recalled the lumpish shape at the bottom of Renfro's hole, how it shuddered and quaked, and my hand dipped into my pocket —

"How's Jacob, anyway?" Thornton had already turned his back. Maybe he was grinning. His dry, Victorian accent quavered up the register toward that of a crone's.

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"Jacob." It seemed to be getting darker by the second in that desolate valley.

"The fellow who sent you to break my legs and whatnot. He misses his uncle. Kidding, kidding. Do you miss Teddy? Does anyone? It would be decent."

"You know Jacob?"

"Not really. His uncle and I were friends, once. Teddy lived on the edge of my circle. I never gathered the impression he spoke of me to anyone...uninitiated. Jacob would not suit my purposes."

"I'm here to find out what happened to Teddy."

"Truly? I supposed you came because of the *Sequence*."

"See, I'm kind of stuck on the chicken or the egg theory. I'll take whatever I can get. So give."

"Teddy vanished. A boating accident, wasn't it?"

"After visiting you."

"Teddy was a big boy. Big enough for both of us. Remove your hand from the gun, Marvin. Harm me and you'll never get what you came for."

My lungs burned. "Harm you. There's no reason. Is there?"

"For some men, there is always a reason. It's what you do well, hurting. You're a terrier. I know everything about you, Marvin. I smell meanness cooking in your blood. The blood on your hands. I ask, do you want blood from me, or knowledge? Here is a crossroads."

"I want to know about the photographs. I need to understand what's happening to me." I said this simply, even humbly. I removed my hand from the revolver.

"It's not only happening to you. It's happening to everyone, everywhere. *You're* tuned in to the correct frequency, and therein lies the difference." Thornton twisted his oversized head to regard me without shifting his shoulders. His face was milky. A face of unwholesome flexibility; and yes, his grin fetched to mind sickles and horns. "Let's amble — we'll do lunch, we'll chat. I'll show you my gallery. It's an amazing gallery. I'll show you *Imago*. You'll enjoy it, Marvin. You'll sleep again. Sleep without nightmares." He was walking before he finished, beckoning with a casual twitch of his hand. His oilskin poncho slithered in his wake not unlike a tail.

I followed on wooden legs. Crows argued behind us.

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The Quonset hut was so old its floor was a sunken mass of caramelized wood and dirt. An arch in the rear opened to darkness. Moth-eaten banners of curiously medieval design hung from the rafters, casting fluttery shadows upon the long table where I mechanically chewed a ham sandwich and drank a sour beer that Roy Fulcher had fetched. Thornton had departed, promising a swift return. He asked Fulcher to attend to my needs.

Light oozed through window glass that sagged and pooled at the bottom of rotten frames. Crates made pyramids against the walls, alongside boxes, barrels, and stacks of curling newspapers. Homey.

Fulcher watched me eat. His features were vulpine and his lank beard was stained yellow-brown around the mouth. He smelled ripe. Farther off, a group of fellow colonists played at a ping-pong table. They cast sly glances our way and chuckled with suppressed brutality. Four men, two women, ages indeterminate. They were scrawny, haggard and unwashed. Several more came and went, shuffling. Zombies but for a merry spark in their eyes, satisfied smirks.

I said, "Here's the million-dollar question — where's the caveman buried?"

"Caveman? I don't think there's a caveman." Fulcher's was an earthy accent, a nasal drawl that smacked of coal mines and tarpaper shanties.

"All this trouble and no caveman?"

"Sorry."

"It's okay. Jacob will get over it," I said. "I don't suppose you'll tell me where Ammon took the *Imago Sequence*? That won't hurt anything, if there's no caveman."

Fulcher leaned in. "Take a spoon and dig a hole in your chest. That's where he made his pictures."

I pushed my plate aside. I wiped my lips with a dingy cloth towel. I stared at him, long and steadily. I said, "If you won't talk about Ammon, tell me about your colony. Love what you've done with the place. What do you guys do for fun in these parts?" I'd cultivated a talent for reading people, weighing them at a glance, separating shepherds from sheep. It was nothing special, a basic survival technique — but it came up dry now. These people confounded my expectations. Was I in a commune or a militia compound? Were these hippie cultists, leftwing anarchists, or

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something else? I gave one of the more brazen ping-pong players — the redhead from town — a hard look. Fulcher had called him Clint. Clint's grin vanished and he concentrated on his game. Human, at least.

"You know," Fulcher said.

"I hate word games, Roy. They make me hostile."

"Ask Anselm."

"I'm asking you."

"It brought you to us — one from multitudes. You still question what our work is here?"

"It? If you mean the *Imago Sequence*, then yeah, I'm full of questions."

"Anselm will answer your *questions* in due course."

"Well, Roy, problem is, I'm kind of stupid. People usually need to repeat stuff."

Fulcher's expression grew rigid. "You don't want to see. Surprise — it's too late. The fictions you've invented, your false assumptions, your pretenses, will soon be blown apart. I doubt it will profit you in the least. You're a thug."

"Story of my life; nobody likes me. I guess you'd be willing to show me the big picture. Shoot me down with your intellectual superiority."

"Anselm will show you the cosmic picture, Mr. Cortez."

"Isn't it customary for you religious zealots to have pamphlets lying around? Betcha there's a printing press somewhere in this Taj Mahal. Surely you've got propaganda for the recruits? And beads? I like beads."

"No pamphlets, no recruits. This is *Imago Colony*. Religion doesn't apply."

"Oh, no? What's with all the faux Roman crucifixes in the back forty?"

"The crucifixes? Those are authentic. Anselm imported them."

I tried to wrap my mind around that concept. The implications eluded me. I said, "Bullshit. What the hell for?"

"The obvious — sport. Anselm has exotic tastes. He enjoys aspects of cultural antiquity."

"Yeah, so I hear. And he has a thing about bugs, I guess; sort of similar to his mentor. Seems to be a reliable pattern with lunatics. An imago is an insect, right?"

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"It's symbolic."

"Oh. I thought the bug thing was cute."

"An imago is not *any* insect. The final instar of an insect, its supreme incarnation. Care for another beer?"

"I'm good." I gestured at the ping-pong tournament. "Weedy crowd, Roy. Somebody told me there were forty, fifty of you in this camp."

"Far less, these days. Attrition."

"Uh-huh."

"You've come during harvest season, Mr. Cortez. That's what we do in the cold months. The others are engaged, those who remain. Things will quicken in the spring. People seem to be more driven to enlightenment during sandal weather. Spiritualists, nature enthusiasts, software engineers on holiday with wives and kiddies. We get all kinds."

"Thornton is off to play plantation overseer, eh? I wonder what you kids harvest in these parts — poppies? Opium is Afghanistan's chief export — ask the Taliban what it paid for its military hardware, the light bills in its palaces. The climate around here is about goddamned ideal. You'd be millionaires. I've got a couple pals, line you right out for a piece of the pie."

Fulcher rubbed his dented brow, smiled. "What wonderful irony! We do love to trip. You have me there. Poppies, that's very funny. I almost miss those days. I stick with cigarettes anymore."

"Lay your gimmick on me."

"Evolution."

"You and everybody else."

"What do people want?" Fulcher raised his grimy hand to forestall my answer. "What do people truly want — what would induce a man to sell his soul?"

"To be healthy, wealthy, and wise," I said with mild sarcasm. Mild because as I uttered the punch line to the children's rhyme, coldness began to unfold in my bones. The tumblers in my head were turning again.

"Bravo, Mr. Cortez. Power, wisdom, immortality." His expression altered. "We have found something that will afford us...longevity, at least. With longevity comes everything else."

"The Fountain of Youth?" *In the deep mountain woods a mossy*

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statue spurted black water. Congregations of hillbillies in coveralls bathed in its viscid pool. A bonfire, a forest of uncured pelts swaying. A piper. I shuddered. "Dancing girls, winning lotto tickets?"

"A catalyst. A mechanism that compresses aeons of future human evolution. Although future is a relative term."

"Ammon's photographs." It seemed obvious. Everything seemed patently obvious, except that the room was undulating and I couldn't figure out who was playing the flute. A panpipe, actually; high, thin, discordant. It pierced my brain.

Fulcher ignored the music. He flushed, warming to my edification. "The *Imago Sequence* is a trigger. If you've got the right genes, you might already be a winner."

I rubbed my ear; the pipe raised unpleasant specters to mind, set them gibbering. *The monstrous hominid opened its mouth wider, wider.* "How does that shit work?"

"Take a picture of God, tack it on the wall and see who bows. Recognition is the key. It doesn't make a difference what you comprehend intellectually, only what stirs on a cellular level, what awakens when it recognizes the wellspring of creation."

"Don't tell me you believe the caveman is God."

"I said there's no caveman. Look deeper, friend. Reality lies beyond the surface. It's not the Devil in the details, it's God."

"Aha! You *are* a bunch of Christian cultists."

"We do not exist to worship an incomprehensible being. A being which assuredly lacks the means to appreciate slavish devotion."

"Seems pointless to have a god at all, when you put it like that."

"Do you supplicate plutonium? Do you sing hymns to uranium? We bask in the corona of an insensate majesty. In its sway we seek to lay the foundation blocks of a new city, a new civilization. We're pioneers. Our frontier is the grand wasteland between Alpha and Omega."

"Will you transform into a being of pure energy and migrate to Alpha Centauri?"

"Quite opposite. Successful animal organisms are enduring organisms. Enduring organisms are extremely basic, extremely efficient. Tarantulas. Scorpions. Reptiles. Flies."

"Don't forget cockroaches. They're going to inherit the Earth." I

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laughed, began coughing. The room wobbled. "So Thornton is what — the messiah helping you become the best imago you can be?"

"Anselm is the Imago. We are maggots. We are provender."

"I get it. He does the transcending and you get the slops."

"It is good to have a purpose in life. To be an integral part of the great and terrible cycle." Fulcher shook his head. "As I serve him, he served Ammon, and Ammon served the one before him down through time gone to dust. '*By sating the image of the Power they fulfill their fleshly contract. By suckling the teat of godliness the worthy shall earn their reward.*' Thus it is written in a book much more venerable than the Bible. For we who survive to remake ourselves in the image of the Power, all risks are acceptable."

"Reverend Jones rides again! Pass the grape Kool-Aid!"

"Hysterical, much?"

"Naw, just lately." I took a breath. "I wonder though, what does a guy do after he reaches the top of the ol' ladder? Live in a cave and compose epic poetry? Answer riddles? Pick up a sword and lay waste to Rome?"

"Caligula was one of us, actually."

I didn't know what to say to that. I plowed ahead. "Well?"

"Basic organisms require basic pleasures."

"Basic pleasures?" The chilly sensation linked hands with vertigo and did a Scottish jig. I was as a figurine in that enormous room.

"Subsistence and copulation. That's what the good life boils down to, my friend. Eating and fucking. Whoever you want, whatever you want, whenever you want."

The mouth opening, opening —

"Power to the people." I was slurring. Why was I slurring?

"Ready to go?" Fulcher rose, still smiling through his matted beard. We walked through the tall archway. He lightly gripped my elbow to steady me. One beer and I was drunk as a sailor on the third day of shore leave. The corridor expanded in the best Escher fashion, telescoping into infinite shadow. There were ragged tapestries at intervals, disfigured statues, a well-trammeled carpet with astrological designs. The corridor branched and branched again at grand arches marred by ages of smoke. At one fork, a kerosene lamp swung on a sooty chain. Behind a massive iron door the piping shrilled, died, shrilled. Hoarse screams of the primordial

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sex act, exhausted sobs, laughter and applause. Mrs. Chin's photograph haunted me.

"The gallery," Fulcher said.

I recognized the musk upon him, finally. For a horrible moment I thought we would go through that door. We continued down the other hall.

Fulcher brought me to a dingy chamber lit by a single dirty bulb in an overhead cage. The room was windowless and bare except for a large chair made of wood and iron. The chair had arm straps and leg shackles; an artifact from the Spanish Inquisition. It was not difficult to picture the fallen bishops, the heretical nobles who had shrieked in its embrace.

"Please, make yourself comfortable." Fulcher helped me along with a shove.

I slumped in the strange chair, my head heavy as a wrecking ball, and watched as he produced a nasty looking bowie knife and expertly sliced off my clothes. When he encountered the revolver he emptied the cylinder, slid the weapon into his waistband without comment. He cinched my arms and legs; his fingers glowed, dragging tracers as they adjusted buckles and straps. Seemingly he had grown extra arms. I could only gawk at this phantasm; I felt quite docile. "Wow, Roy. What was in my beer? I feel terrific."

"One should hope. You ingested five hundred milligrams of synthetic mescaline — enough to launch a rhinoceros into orbit."

"Party foul, and on the first date too. I thought you didn't do dope anymore."

"I dabble in the manufacturing end of the spectrum. Frankly, all that metaphysical mumbo-jumbo about hallucinogens affecting perception in a meaningful way is wishful thinking. Poor Huxley." Fulcher stepped back, surveyed his handiwork while rolling a cigarette. The yellow flare of his lighter painted his face, made him a devil. "Oh, except for you. You're special. You've seen *Alpha* and *Beta*. As my pappy would say, you've got the taint, boy." He blurred around the edges. With each inhalation the cherry of his cigarette brightened, became Jupiter's red sore.

I noticed the walls were metallic — whorls whorled, pits and pocks formed. Condensation trickled. Smoke made arabesques and demons. The walls were a tapestry from a palace in Hell.

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The panpipe started wheedling again and Thornton entered the room on cue. He pushed a rickety hospital tray with a domed cover. The cover was scalloped, silver finish flaking. A maroon handprint smeared its curve.

"This is a bad sign," I said.

Thornton was efficient. He produced an electric razor and shaved a portion of my head to stubble, dug a thumb under my carotid artery and traced veins in my skull with a felt-tip pen. He tweaked my nose in a fatherly manner, stripped off his coat and rolled his sleeves to the elbows. His skin gleamed like coral, cast faint reflections upon the walls and ceiling. Shoals of phantom fish scattered above, regrouped and swam into an abyss; a superhighway and its endless traffic looped beneath my feet; it rippled and collapsed into a trench of unimaginable depths.

I watched him remove a headpiece from the tray — a clumsy framework of clamps and screws; a dunce cap with a collar. Parts had never been cleaned. I wanted to scream when he fitted it over my head and neck, locked it in place with a screwdriver. I sighed.

Fulcher stubbed his cigarette, produced a palm-sized digital camera and aimed it at me. He gave Thornton a thumbs-up.

Thornton selected a scalpel from the instruments on the tray, weighed it in his hand. "Teddy was a friend — I would never use him as provender, but neither could I set him on the path to Olympus. There's limited room in the boat, you see. Weak, genetically flawed, but a jolly nice fellow. A gentleman. Imagine my disappointment when he showed up on my doorstep last fall. Not only had the old goat bought *Parallax Alpha*, he'd viewed *Beta* as well. He demanded to see *Imago*. As if I could simply snap my fingers and show him. Wouldn't listen to reason, wouldn't go home and fall to pieces quietly like a good boy. So I enlightened him. It was out of my hands after that. Now, we come to you." He sliced my forehead, peeled back a flap of skin. Fulcher taped it down.

"What?" I said. "What?"

Thornton raised a circular saw with a greasy wooden handle. He attached it to a socket in my headpiece. "Trephination. An ancient method to open the so-called Third Eye. Fairly crude; Ammon taught me how and a Polynesian tribe showed him — he wasn't a surgeon either. He performed his own in a Bangkok opium den with a serrated knife and a

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corkscrew while a stoned whore held a mirror. Fortunately, medical expertise is not a requisite in this procedure."

The dent in Fulcher's brow drew my gaze. I sighed again, saddened by wisdom acquired too late in the day.

Thornton patted me kindly. His touch lingered as a caress. "Don't fret, it's not a lobotomy. You wished to behold *Imago*, this is the way. What an extraordinary specimen you are, Marvin, my boy. Your transformation will be a most satisfying conquest as I have not savored in years. I am sure to delay your reintegration for the span of many delightful hours. I will have compensation for your temerity."

"Mr. Thornton," I gasped; trembled with the effort of rolling my eye to meet his. "Mrs. Chin said the glacier is coming. I dream it every night; flies buzzing in my brain. It's killing me. That's why I came."

Thornton nodded. "Of course. I've seen it a thousand times. Everyone who has crawled into my lair wanted to satisfy one desire or another. What will satisfy you, O juicy morsel? To hear, to know?" He yawned. "Would you be happy to learn there is but one God and that all things come from Him? Existence is infinitely simple, Marvin — cells within cells, dreams within dreams, from the molten Fingertip of God Almighty, to the antenna of a roach, on this frequency and each of a billion after. Thus it goes until the circuit completes its ambit of the core, a protean-reality where dwells an intellect of surpassing might, yet impotent; bound as it is in the well of its own gravity. Cognition does not flourish in that limitless quagmire, the cosmic repository of information. The lightning of Heaven is reduced to torpid impulses that spiral outward, seeking gratification by osmosis. And by proxy. We are bags of nerves and electrolytes, fragile and weak, and we decompose so quickly. Which is the purpose, the very cunning design. Our experiences are readily digested to serve the biological imperative of a blind, vast sponge. Does it please you? Do you require more?"

A spike glinted within the ring of saw-teeth. Thornton casually pressed this spike into my skull, seated it with a few taps of a rubber mallet. He put his lips next to my ear. His breath reeked copper. "The prophets proclaim the end is near. I'll whisper to you something they don't know — the world ended this morning as you were sleeping, half-frozen on the mountainside. It ended aeons before your father squirted his

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genetic material into your mother. It will end tomorrow as it ends every day, same time, same station." He started cranking.

Listening to the rhythmic burr of metal on bone, I was thankful the mescaline had soldered my nerve endings. Thornton divided and divided again until he crowded the room. Pith helmets, top hats, arctic coats, khakis, corporate suits, each double dressed for a singular occasion, each one animated by separate experience, but all of them smiling with tremendous pleasure as they turned the handle, turned the handle, turned the handle. Their faces sloughed, dough swelling and splitting. Beneath was something raw, and moist, and dark.

I glimpsed the face of the future and failed to comprehend its shape. Blood poured into my eyes. The panpipe went mad.

8.

THE WORLD ENDS every day.

Picture me walking in a rock garden under the dipping branches of cherry blossom trees. I love stones and there are heavy examples scattered across the garden; olive-bearded, embedded in the tough sod. God's voice echoes as through a gigantic gramophone horn, but softly from the lead plate of sky, and not God, it's Thornton guiding the progression, driving an auger into my skull while the music plays. Push it aside, keep moving toward a mound in the distance....

No Thornton, auger, no music; only God, the garden, and I. Where is God? Everywhere, but especially in the earth, the dark, warm earth that opens as a cave mouth in the side of a hill. God calls from the hill, in voices of grinding rock and gurgling water.

I walk toward the cave. Sleet falls, captured betwixt burning and freezing precisely as I am caught. Nor is the sleet truly sleet. A swirl of images falling, million-million shards fractured from a vast hoary mirror. There am I, and I and I a million million times, broken, melting....

I walk through God's rock garden, trampling incarnations of myself....

Watery images flickered on the wall. A home movie with the volume lowered. Choppy because the cameraman kept adjusting to peer

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over the shoulder of a tall figure who attended a third person in the awful chair — my chair. The victim was not I; it was a mirror casting a false reflection. And it wasn't a movie in the strictest sense; I detected no camera, nor aperture to project the film. More hallucinations then. More something.

Teddy's face, trapped in the conical helm; his feet scuffed and rattled the shackles. Thornton blocked the view, elbow pumping with the practiced ease of a farmer's wife churning butter. Muffled laughter, walnuts being cracked. The image went dark, but the dim sounds persisted.

Claustrophobia gagged me. I was still strapped in the chair, the helm fixed to my head. There was a hole in my head. My right eye was crusted and blind. I shuddered with chills. How much time had passed? Where had Fulcher and Thornton gone? Had they shown me *Imago* as promised? My memories balked.

As my faculties reengaged, my fear swelled. They had shredded my clothes, confiscated my belongings, tortured me. They would kill me. That was scarcely my fear. I dreaded what else would happen first.

The wall brightened with new images. *Sperm wriggled, hungry and fast. A wasp made love to a tarantula, thrusting, thrusting with its stinger. Mastiffs flung themselves upon a threshing stag, dangled from its antlers like ornaments. Fire ants swarmed over a gourd half-buried in desert earth —*

Fulcher drifted through the door, Clint at his heel. I remained limp when Fulcher scrutinized me briefly; he flashed a penlight in my good eye, checked my pulse. He murmured to his partner, and began unbuckling my straps. Clint hung back, perhaps to guard against a revival of my aggressive philosophy. Even so, he appeared bored, distracted.

I did not stir until Fulcher freed my arms. It occurred to me that the mescaline cocktail must've worn off because I wasn't feeling docile anymore. Nothing was premeditated; my mind was well below a rational state. I pawed his face — weakly, a drunken gesture, which he brushed aside. I became more insistent, got a fistful of his beard on the next half-hearted swipe, my left hand slithered behind his neck. Fulcher pried at my wrist, twisted his head. Frantic, he braced his boot against the chair and tried to push off. His back bowed and contorted.

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A ghostly spider mounted a beetle; they clinched.

Growing stronger, more purposeful, I yanked him into my lap, and his beard ripped, but that was fine. I squeezed his throat and vertebrae popped the way it happens when you lift a heavy salmon by the tail. Stuff separates.

Clint tried to pull Fulcher, exactly as a man will pull a comrade from quicksand. Failing, he snatched up a screwdriver and stabbed me in the ribs. No harm, my ribs were covered with a nice slab of gristle and suet. Punch a side of beef hanging from a hook and see what you get.

A truck careened across a strange field riddled with holes. The vehicle juked and jived and nose-dived into the biggest hole of them all —

I dropped Fulcher and staggered from the chair. Clint stabbed me in the shoulder. I laughed; it felt good. I palmed his face, clamped down with full strength. He bit me, began a thick, red stream down my arm. He choked and gargled. Bubbles foamed between my finger webs. I waltzed him on tiptoes and banged his head against a support beam. *Bonk, bonk, bonk*, just like the cartoons. Just like Jackson Pollack. I stopped when his facial bones sort of collapsed and sank into the general confusion of his skull.

I fumbled with the screws of my helm, gave it up as a hopeless cause. I left the cell and wandered along the hall, trailing one hand against the rough surfaces. People met me, passed me without recognition, without interest. These people were versions of myself. I saw *a younger me dressed in a tropical shirt and a girl on my arm; me in a funeral suit and a sawed-off shotgun in my hand; another me pale and bruised, a doughnut brace on my neck, hunched on crutches; still another me, gray-haired, dead drunk, wild glare fixed upon the middle distance.* And others, too many others coming faster until it hurt my eyes. They flowed around me, collided, disappeared into the deep, lightless throat of the hall until all possibilities were lost.

Weight shifted within the bowels of Thornton's Pleasure Dome. A ponderous door was flung wide and a chorus of damned cries echoed up the corridors. The muscles between my shoulder blades tightened. I picked up the pace.

The main area was deserted but for a woman sweeping ashes from the

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barrel stove and a sturdy man in too-loose long johns eating dinner at a table. The woman was an automaton; she regarded me without emotion, resumed her mechanical duties. The man put aside his spoon, considering whether to challenge me. He remained undecided as I stumbled outside, bloody and birth-naked. The icy breeze plucked at my scalp, caused my wound to throb with the threat of a migraine. I was in a place far removed from such concerns.

A better man would've set a match to the drums of diesel, blown the place to smithereens Hollywood style. No action star, I headed for the vehicles.

Twilight cocooned the valley. The sky was smooth as opal. A crimson band pulsed at the horizon — the sun elongated to its breaking point. Clouds scudded from invisible distances, flew by at unnatural velocity.

"Don't go," Thornton said. A whisper, a shout.

I glanced back.

He filled the doorway of the Quonset hut, which was tiny, was receding. His many selves had merged, yet flickered beneath his skin, ready to burst forth. His voice had relinquished its command, now waned fragile, as it traveled across the gulf to find me. "You're opening doors without any idea of where they lead. It's a waste. Sweet God, what a waste!"

I kept walking, limping.

"Marvin!" A hot lash of hatred and appetite throbbed from his dwindling voice. "Say hello to Teddy!" He shrank to a speck, was lost.

A fleet of canvas-top trucks shimmered upon an island in a sea of velvet. They warped and ran with the fluidity of quicksilver, a kaleidoscope revolving around the original. I picked the closest truck and dragged myself inside. Keys dangled from the ignition. The helm was too tall for the cab; I was forced to drive with my head on my shoulder. Fresh blood seeped from the wound and obscured my vision.

The truck bucked and crow-hopped as I clanged gears, stomped the accelerator and sent it hurtling across the rugged valley. One road multiplied, became three roads, now six. Now, I was off the road, or the road had melted. Bizarre changes were altering the scenery, toying with my feeble perception. The mountains doubled and redoubled and underwent the transformations of millennia — a range exploding forward,

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rounding and shortening, another backward, rearing into a toothy crown — in the span of heartbeats. It was a rough ride.

I found the knob for the headlights in time to illuminate the sinkhole a few dozen yards ahead. A rapidly widening maw. I slammed the brakes. The cab exploded with dust and smoking rubber. There was a tin-can-under-a-boot crunch and the truck yawed, paused at the rim and toppled in, nose-first. I performed a lazy belly flop through the windshield.

I didn't lose consciousness, unfortunately. I bounced and felt bones crack along old fault lines. Eventually I stopped with a terrific jolt; a feather mattress dropped on a cavern floor. At least the truck didn't come down on top of me — it had lodged in a bottleneck. Its engine shrieked momentarily, sputtered and died. I stared up at the rapidly dulling headlights, as bits of sensation returned to my extremities. Ages passed. When I finally managed to gain my knees, the world was in darkness. What was broken? Ribs, definitely. A sprained knee that swelled as I breathed. Possibly a bone in my back had snapped; insufficient to immobilize me, yet neither could I straighten fully. Cuts on my face and hands. The pain was minor, and that worried me. Why not worse? I had landed in deep, spongy moss, was nearly buried from the impact. It sucked at me as I clambered to solid footing.

The darkness wasn't complete. Aqueous light leaked from slimy surfaces, the low ceiling of sweating rock. As my vision adjusted I saw moss claimed everything. Stinking moss filled crevices and fissures, was habitat of beetles and other things. Sloppy from the eternal drip of water, it squelched between my toes, sucked my ankles. This was a relatively small cave, with a single chimney jammed by the crashed truck. This wasn't a mine shaft; my animal self was positive about that. Nor did it require much heavy thinking to conclude that climbing out of there was impossible. I couldn't raise my left arm above waist level. A single note from the panpipe came faintly. From below. A voice might have murmured my name — I was gasping too loudly and it did not repeat.

A fissure split the rear of the cave, a cramped tunnel descended. Mastering my instincts, I followed it down. The cool air warmed, was soon moist as a panting mouth. Pungent odors clogged my nostrils, watered my eyes. Gradually, the passage widened, opening into a larger area, a cavern of great dimensions. The light strengthened, or my eyes got better,

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because pieces of the cavern joined as Mrs. Chin's photos had joined. And I beheld *Imago*.

Here was the threshold of the Beginning and End.

The roof was invisible but for the tips of gargantuan stalactites, all else shrouded. Moss, more moss, a garden, a forest of moss. But was it moss? I doubted that. Moss didn't quiver where it met flesh, didn't contract as a muscle contracts.

The walls glistened; they glowed not unlike the glow which seeped from Thornton's skin. Shadows of the world dwelt in the walls. Those most familiar to me rose from the depths like champagne bubbles. I passed Teddy's yacht near the surface, its lines quite clean despite being encased. Further along, a seaplane was suspended on high, partially obscured by gloom. It hung, fossilized, an inverted crucifix. There were faces, a frieze of ghastly spectators massed in the tiers of an amphitheater. I averted my gaze, afraid of who I might see pithed in the bell jar. Deeper, inside folds of rock that was not rock, were glimpses of Things to Come. Houses, onion domes and turrets, utopian skylines, the graceful arcs of bridges, rainforests and jagged mountains. And deeper, deeper yet, solar systems of pregnant globes of smothered dirt and vine, and charred stars in endless procession.

I caught myself humming The Doors' "This Is The End." I stood upon a shattered slope, weeping and laughing, and humming the song of death. Thinking probably the same thoughts any lesser primate does when confronted with apocalyptic forces. To these I added, *Damn you, anyway, Jacob! You can shove this favor in your big, flabby ass!* And, *I wonder if Carol is feeding the fish*?

Before me lay the cavern's boundary; another translucent wall. This area was subtly different; it bulged with murky reefs of dubious matter — I conjured the image of coiled organs, the calcified ganglia of some Biblical colossus. Dead roots slithered from an abyss to end abysses — a primordial sea from which all life had been egurgitated. My ears popped with a sudden pressure change. I detected movement.

I tried to run, but my legs were unresponsive, as if they had fallen asleep, and the moss shifted beneath my nerveless feet, dumped me on my ass. I flailed down the slope, which I realized was a funnel, or a trough. This occurred with excruciating slowness, but it was impossible to halt my weight once it got moving. Wherever my skin made contact with the moss I lost sensation. This was because the moss that was not moss stung with

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tiny barbs, stung me as a jellyfish stings. My legs, my back, right hand, then left, until everything from the neck down was anesthetized.

At the bottom, by some trick of geometry, I pitched forward to lie spread-eagle against the curve of the wall. The rock softened, was vaguely gelatinous. I began to sink. Despite my numbed state, it was cold compared to the rank jungle of a cavern. Frigid.

As I sank into the wall, I thought, *Not a wall, a membrane.* Engulfed in amber jelly, tremendous pressure built upon my body, flattened my features. Wrenching my head to free it from imminent suffocation, to scream as an animal screams, dying alone in the wilderness, I saw a blossom of fire in the near distance. An abrupt blue-white flare that seemed to expand forever, then shrink into itself. I opened my mouth, opened my mouth —

The second flash was far smaller, far more remote. It faded swiftly.

I don't know if there was a third. ☙

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Moody's Angels

IT WAS TIME for a good cry.

My agent, Shanna Dimpflmaier, had just delivered the bad news about the nine-months sales figures for my latest novel, *Wrestling with Smoke*.

"Carol, honey, I'm so sorry. You'll crack four figures yet, I promise. I've got a review lined up in the *Twin Cities Literary Gatekeeper*. And you're booked for an interview on the NPR franchise in Sioux Falls. Once Klonpff senses there's a groundswell of interest in your book, I'm sure they'll cut loose some publicity money — "

"Oh, *horsepoop*, Shanna!" I seldom swore, but the circumstances demanded such foul language. "You know as well as I do that Klonpff has written me and my book off. My prose is too fine, my themes too subtle. They're betraying their entire heritage of literary fiction by this callous abandonment, sacrificing me for the bottom line — "

"Carol, I think you need to have a nice big glass of Chardonnay, reread your many good reviews, and consider just how lucky you were to have a rather, shall we say, 'precious' book like yours published at all in this economic climate. This surly attitude of yours does not bode well for future projects. Good-bye."

I hung up the phone, feeling an enormous weariness and sadness descend on my shoulders, like an invisible shawl made of my deceased mother's favorite brand of liverwurst. Great. I had just alienated the last support I had in the publishing industry. What foolish move would I perform next to destroy my literary career? A pole-dance on *Oprah*?

So that's when I had my good cry.

While the tears were still drying, I poured myself the glass of wine Shanna had recommended — but a tart Pinot Grigio, not

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Chardonnay — and pondered my future.

My manuscript-in-progress — a memoir about my youthful experience as an altar girl, titled *My Soul for All to See* — now seemed remote and unworkable to me, like a Martha Stewart project shelved half-finished deep in a closet. How could I possibly go on, dragging exquisite sentences up from the depths of my being, in the face of such contumely and inattention from the world? Where was my natural audience? Surely my words should be reaching more than seven hundred and thirty-six readers, no matter how exquisitely sensitive those select readers might be....

By the time I had sipped my way through half the bottle of wine, I was feeling so maudlin and despairing about my future that I couldn't even jot down useful notes about my mental condition for incorporation into future quasi-autobiographical passages.

And that's when it happened.

The front door to my home burst open, several windows shattered, and suddenly my living room was filled with five striking Amazons.

The five women — all Caucasian, ranging in age from their twenties to their fifties — wore matching white jumpsuits with modest necklines. No tawdry superhero display of cleavage here. Their shoes were sensible flats. They carried stylish purple messenger bags blazoned with the gold initials MA.

One of the women, the only one wearing eyeglasses, spoke first.

"Are you Carol Neatsfoot?"

"Yes...."

"We're here to revive your literary career. We're Moody's Angels!"

With those words, recognition bloomed like the roses in my grandmother's garden before her descent into madness.

Before me stood the five female authors who had formed the much-reviled slate for last year's National Book Award: Kate Walbert, Joan Silber, Christine Schutt, Lily Tuck, and Sarah Shun-Lien Bynum.

But what were they doing dressed like this, away from their keyboards?

"I — I don't understand...."

"Let us put Rick on speakerphone," said the youngest and cutest. "Having won many more awards than we, he'll be able to explain more cogently."

Schutt removed a trim speakerphone from her messenger bag and jacked it into my house's outlet. Instantly, the phone rang, and

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soon the authoritative yet nuanced voice of famed author Rick Moody was parsing my problems.

"Hello, Carol. I've just recently become aware of your situation, and I've dispatched my Angels to remedy it. A fragile, finely honed talent such as yours needs the nurturing that only a plethora of awards nominations can provide. And it's the job of me and my 'girls'" — I could hear the postmodern ironical quotation marks around the word "girls" — "to see that you get them.

"As a direct result of the publicity that's accrued to them since last year's NBA controversy, the women you see before you have all been nominated to judgeships for various literary awards. Their mission — along with that of me and my many 'co-conspirators' such as Stewart O'Nan — is to nominate as many unsung, hermetic, paltry-selling authors for as many prizes as possible. And I'm pleased to announce that you, Carol Neatsfoot, qualify eminently."

"Why — thank you — I think...."

"No thanks necessary, Carol. It's simply the duty of all well-off, Hollywood-friendly-yet-still-*New-Yorker*-sanctified male writers such as myself — who by the way has survived and flourished after being called 'the worst writer of my generation' in the pages of *The New Republic* — to foist our tastes on the great unwashed masses.

"Now, Carol, I don't want you to get your hopes up too high. Award nominations and public ridicule can only do so much to advance a writer's career. But I do want to mention one name that might hint at what we can accomplish when our team puts its back to the wheel of publicity. Elfriede Jelinek."

"Who?"

Rick Moody's voice acquired a testy tone, rather like that of my first husband whenever I used to burn supper whilst in the throes of composition.

"The latest winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature? Author of *Bambiland* and other masterpieces? *That* Elfriede Jelinek?"

"Oh, right. Sorry."

"No problem, Carol, we all have our literary lacunae. Now, let me just ask you one final question. Have you published work in any other genre? We're performing our career-boosting function across the publishing spectrum, just to illustrate our broad-mindedness. For instance, I could easily get you a slot on the Compton Crook Award ballot, or a William L. Crawford Award nomination, if you had written any science fiction at all. Maybe even a

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Susan C. Petrey Scholarship to Clarion. Just so long as your work has never actually sold more than a hundred copies or so."

Something about Rick's question piqued my interest, but I had to confess to him that I had always been a firm believer in mimesis.

"Well, no matter. We'll just have to be content with a Pulitzer. Now, girls, if one of you will get Carol's signature on the official credo while the rest of you restore Ms. Neatsfoot's home to the condition in which you found it, I think we can call this a wrap."

The oldest of the Angels came up to me bearing, of all things, a tattered napkin.

"This is the original napkin on which Stewart O'Nan penned our manifesto about poor sales being no indicator of literary quality. If you'd just sign right here, you'll become a member of our ever-growing tribe of slighted geniuses."

I signed, but with growing trepidation. Then, before I could count to sixty, as if in a childish game of hide-and-seek like the one where I had been "It" and all my friends had gone to the movies without me while my eyes were still closed, the five women reglazed my broken windows, repaired the latch on the door, unplugged the speaker-phone, and vanished.

I sat back in my chair, stunned. Then I corked the bottle of wine, and instead dug out a fifth of whisky last used for spiking holiday eggnog. I poured myself a stiff shot, carried it to my computer, and booted up my word-processing program.

Then I sat down to begin a new book.

But first I grabbed my copy of Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* off my shelves, so I could find the dedication where she revealed the name of *her* agent.

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As long as the weather's good, you can find Robert Reed running intervals every Tuesday on the track by the football stadium. That stadium has seen its share of controversy lately, as the home team had some trouble with the coach, and then had some more trouble replacing him. The whole process of finding a new head for the football program set those mental wheels spinning...

The New Deity

By Robert Reed

A NEWS CONFERENCE WAS called for early afternoon and then delayed twice for reasons never explained. In the interim, a wild hailstorm rolled in from the west, peculiar fires sprang up in various kitchens and trash heaps, and every sleeping baby in the state woke from his nap screaming.

Then as evening fell, the overseer at last stepped up to the podium. He was a handsome fellow who wore a perpetual smile and a smooth unruffled air. Since coming onboard several months before, he had spoken glowingly about tradition, pride, and the demands of success. Like the man or not, he was undeniably smart, immune to criticism, and in ways that few others can even pretend to be, he was without fear. On that particular evening, the smile seemed especially radiant, while the eyes were the coldest blue. He gazed out at the assembled media, and with a voice that might be confused for warm, he said, "Our state has been blessed, and for a very long time. Our deity has performed His role with distinction and honor. We simply cannot thank Him enough. But by the same token, time marches, circumstances change, and our neighboring

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states and communities have been embracing new faiths and philosophies — many of them thriving as a consequence.

"This is why I have decided, with the approval and full support of the Board, to relieve our Good God of His duties, effective immediately.

"The search to find His replacement is already well underway.

"Until that process is finished, His top lieutenant will serve as our acting Agent-of-Divine-Actions, and you may worship Her or not.

"As always, your personal devotions are entirely your own concern."

Of course none of this was a complete surprise. There had been a few disappointing years of late, and after a private meeting between the overseer and the Grand Old Man, a carefully crafted press release spoke a little too glowingly about the sanctity of the relationship, while leaks hinted that the climate between the two entities was far short of cordial. But when that final decision was announced, everyone heard thunderbolts. The fact that the Old Man wasn't present at the news conference spoke volumes. Cameras eventually captured Him in the open, and the emboldened reporters bombarded Him with pointed questions. How did it feel to be fired? Who did He blame? Would He attempt some kind of retribution? And if not, what were His plans for the near-term?

Answering only the final query, He said, "I plan to rest. And perhaps for a very long time."

This came from an entity that never took vacations — a tireless, imperious, and very remote example of godhood that always wore a handsome face and a busy, even consumed manner.

"Where will you do this resting?" one reporter blurted.

"I really don't know," the Grand Old Man confessed. And then with a few more long strides, he started ascending into the heavens — onboard the trim robin-egg blue Gulfstream that was awarded him as a bonus after one of his final good years.

Everyone knows the world is full of things that are real, though they have no true flesh. The deities, great and small, are exceptionally real. So are dreams and desires, too. And there are those busy, relentless entities called rumors — bold little monsters too tiny to see, too slippery to hold.

Within moments, it seemed as if everybody in the state knew exactly

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who would be the next deity. The trouble was that more than a dozen names were being bantered about. Was the overseer sending up trial balloons? Or maybe members of the Board were voting for personal favorites? Certainly, it had been years since the public had shown as much interest in any single issue. Most observers couldn't remember days like this. And then, just when matters seemed complicated enough, the acting deity — that one-time loyal lieutenant — made a seemingly offhand remark to a newspaper columnist. "I've always wanted to watch over a great state," She admitted with a low rumble and a winsome smile. "And yes, I do feel ready to take the plow in My good hands. I've told the overseer exactly that: I wish to be considered for this great job."

Suddenly it seemed as if the world was full of ambitious, hungry gods.

Each day brought word of some fresh candidate — a city lord wishing to move up in responsibilities; another state's deity needing clean horizons; or sometimes a foreign god or exotic spirit who spoke in elliptic terms about bringing some unique brand of miracles and subtle intervention into a new realm.

If just a tenth of those rumors were true, the overseer's office would have been jammed with holy bodies.

But that was never the case.

The selection process, like human faith and modern electronics, was a mystical and very nearly invisible phenomenon. The overseer would assume new names and fly to neutral locations, meeting secretly with a small, highly select group of candidates. But that didn't stop wagging tongues. Everyone seemed to know someone who had that watchful cousin or old pal who most definitely had seen a famous god strolling through a local shopping mall, or perhaps sipping beer suds in a landmark tavern. They might appear human, but the knowing eye can always pierce the best disguise. One Big Name was observed on the state's most exclusive golf course, putting for a birdie, while a young ocean goddess was caught swimming laps in one of the large irrigation reservoirs. Why the Big Name would bother with the likes of this modest state, nobody could say. And how a saltwater specialist could help the corn grow was never explained. But that wasn't the point. In the absence of information, information created itself. What is true about quantum mechanics is doubly true in the affairs of the human heart.

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There also was a second, decidedly less optimistic thread of rumor and innuendo. Ugly stories about the Grand Old Man began to emerge — tales of disinterest and small incompetences, godly sins and human-style ones. So many years of exemplary service had caused Him to grow lazy, it was said. The worshipful words and long earnest prayers still fed Him, as all gods need to be fed, but they also built a sturdy complacency. Wishes were not being answered as quickly as before. The quality of His miracles was definitely on the decline. He might have been playing fast and loose with certain state funds, and according to range of sources, the Grand Old Man had cultivated affairs with at least two human women, and possibly many, many more.

Those rumors had more backbone than the noise about candidates, and because the ugly stories helped people understand His dismissal, they were embraced, believed, and eventually made into History.

Meanwhile, the interim deity watched over the state and its good people. During Her tenure, the winter proved cold, but at least it provided abundant snow and slow, timely thaws. Then came some good spring rains, particularly in the western regions that had been suffering from long-term drought.

She was just what the state needed, plainly.

Columnists began to chant their support. "Keep the Gal-God," one old newspaperman wrote, while a liberal young woman writer claimed, "This is the millennium of the Maternal."

But about the actual candidates, the overseer said nothing.

Nothing at all.

When news broke, it came from another part of the continent. According to other media outlets, the ruling deity from a smaller, much poorer state was going to accept the job later that day. The evidence was slender but telling: A state plane had been dispatched, and at that moment, it was waiting on the tarmac in the other state's capital, engines running, ready to whisk Him back to His new home. But the plane remained on the ground, void of passengers. And afterward it turned about, empty still, and began the long, embarrassing flight home.

Later, in an investigation that would consume the attentions of two state attorneys general, it was determined that the god-in-waiting had never intended to leave His current post. Pretending to accept the offer

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was just a bargaining ploy — a scheme hatched by Him and by His agent to let them extract a richer contract from His own people.

As a ruse, it worked wonderfully.

But the overseer found himself looking silly and foolish. A sudden press conference was called, and nothing was accomplished except that he spent most of an hour defending a process that nobody could see and asking for patience when there was no hint of a deadline in the future.

But that ugliness must have supplied inspiration, because after that, events moved at a decidedly crisper pace.

The acting deity finally received an official interview — an event that She described to one reporter as being, "Polite talk and idle b.s."

Other assistants tried their incorporeal best to win the job, and failed.

And then, during those very last days, the most incredible and chilling rumor took hold: The overseer had looked at all of the candidates that the world had to offer, and after much consideration, he had decided to claim the job for himself.

For Himself.

Such things had happened in the past, on occasion. Mortals could always leave their realm, if deemed worthy according to certain arcane laws and convoluted customs. Just as the gods could lose their immortality and livelihood, if they proved themselves to be total boobs.

A final press conference was called.

That last rumor was taken as fact, and the people of the state began readying themselves for this unexpected change.

Yet the first godly form that strode out before the cameras was not the overseer, but instead one of the young gods from one of the world's new churches — a bold, baby-faced deity with ties to a hundred nations and fifty million people. Why would a Great Soul bother with the likes of us? That question bubbled out of everyone who was sitting at home, and from each of the spellbound reporters standing in that very crowded room.

"Why do I come here?" their new god roared back at them. "I will tell you why!"

Then in crisp, concrete terms, he outlined a glorious future: He would continue to oversee the weather and the crops, the health of individuals and little communities too. But in this day and age, what mattered most were the miracles wrapped around science and technology. The state's

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high literacy rates were going to waste, he warned. He spoke about a good university system that could be great. With a warm smile, he described laboratories where Ph.D.s would bow to Him before uncovering new answers to old problems. Or better, find new problems that no one, not even His Greatness, could have imagined. Then He reminded His audience, "Genius is as wondrous as the remission of a cancer, and as miracles go, it is twice as rare." Then He spoke about the need to attract high-tech industries to the High Plains, with His help as well as lucrative tax breaks; and as the state economy moved away from simple agriculture, everyone would profit — Him included, naturally.

"I see a future of great prosperity and purposeful change," He declared, causing golden images to appear in everyone's mind. And then, just as His sense of the New began to shake the old conventions, He added, "But I will not leave behind those traditions and proven ways that matter to you most."

With a wink, He said, "The oldest ways remain the best."

Then He threw a strong arm around the overseer, squeezing the handsome, fearless, and always smiling fellow with a rough familiarity.

"In the oldest times," He continued, "the arrival of the new deity demanded a ceremony possessing both significance and sacrifice. And it should be the same today, I believe. All of you think that way. Do you not?"

Suddenly, the overseer's perpetual smile began to crumble.

The new deity glanced his way, winking again and whispering a few words that no one else in the world could make out.

The overseer straightened his back, trying to fight the gentle but irresistible shove of a god's right hand...and he tumbled face first amongst the reporters and cameramen...while a mighty god said to all, "Please Me, and I might stay a little while."

A soft squeal was heard.

"Thrill Me," he declared, "and I will make you glad."

Then blood rose in a neat crimson fountain, and a cheer rose up over the good sweet land.

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

KOREAN FUTURES

SEVENTEEN years ago, *Die Hard* marked an evolution in the action picture, one characterized by a formulaic mixture of overstated violence, large explosions, and a wisecracking hero whose post-modern self-commentary soon became a cliché of such movies. We tend to remember of these movies not their overall narrative, but quotable moments. For example, I recall almost nothing about the plot of *The Last Boy Scout*, yet I remember quite clearly the Eurotrash villain telling Bruce Willis that he wanted to make him scream, whereupon Bruce, cigarette in hand, thoroughly disengaged, said, "Play some rap music." Such noirish haiku lend the picture a continuity it otherwise lacks — they are like pins holding a celluloid tapestry of fireballs and gunshots in place.

Films of this sort have come to dominate the American landscape and are judged, for the most part, by relaxed critical standards; they are thought of as "thrill rides," entertainments for the groundlings of the era. When it was first released, *Die Hard* was reviled by critics for its shallow portrayal of character and its substitution of body count for plot; yet when viewed in context of its innumerable imitators, the *Lethal Weapon* series, the innumerable alpha-male posturings of Arnold Schwarzenegger, and the like, it looms as a paragon of plotting and characterization, a veritable *Citizen Kane* among Hollywood action pictures, and seems the product of a relative Golden Age rather than, as is actually the case, marking a sharp downturn in the gradient of the heat death of American culture.

Die Hard and its children were influenced in style and tone by the

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James Bond movies, their dated counterparts, and by the Hong Kong *policiers* of the 1980s. Directors such as John Woo, Tsui Hark, Ringo Lam, and Johnny To stretched the borders of the genre, creating action sequences that were unsurpassed in their kinetic invention; however, these films delved more deeply than did *Die Hard* into the characters of their protagonists, mainly angst-ridden policemen, tormented hitmen, guilt-tripped small-time criminals, and despotic ganglords, effecting a kind of melodramatic, ultraviolent noir that was itself formulaic, albeit a formula that allowed for considerably more variation. Hollywood attempted to co-opt these directors, bringing several of them into its fold, but the "creative" process of the studio film winnowed out the distinctive elements of their work, and they all returned to Hong Kong...with the exception of John Woo, who has devolved into a generic hack and is currently directing the Rock's latest movie, *Spy Hunter*.

During the mid-eighties, in South Korea, yet another tradition developed. Building on the Hong Kong model, the Koreans began turning out action pictures marked by intensely individual directing styles and substantial character development (more substantial than the films of Woo, Lam, etc.), as well as by heightened elements of sexuality and the surreal. Like the Hong Kong films, they verged on melodrama, though of a more complex variety, but some eschewed melodrama completely and proved to be uniquely unsettling, transcending the genre and demanding to be taken seriously. Notable among these latter are the obsessional films of Ki-duk Kim (*Bad Guy*, *Address Unknown*, *The Isle*), which often explore perverse sexual themes in a dark, violent setting, and Joon-ho Bong's exquisitely observed *Memories of Murder*, a thoughtful examination of the psyches of police officers involved in the unsuccessful investigation of a serial killer operating in and around a rural village. But many of South Korea's less ambitious films offer high production values (this despite the fact that the largest budget for any Korean film thus far, the 2004 war epic *Taegukgi*, was a piddling $15 million), intelligent scripts, brilliant cinematography, and action choreography that outstrip the product currently put forward by the Hong Kong film industries. Films like the romantic spy picture *Shiri* (1999); the relentlessly grim *Oldboy* (2003); the atmospheric

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Public Enemy (2002), which manages to be both brutal and comedic; the Sergio Leone-ish *Friend* (2001), which charts the twenty-year-long course of four small-time gangsters; *Nowhere to Hide* (1999), a deconstructionist take on film noir, manga, and the entire Hong Kong action catalogue, starring Joong-Hoon Park, who greatly resembles a Korean John Belushi...these and others make clear that the capitol of the action picture has relocated to Seoul, and that the Koreans are doing it better than anyone else before them.

South Korea's ventures into the science fiction and fantasy genre have been chiefly limited to horror films, some quite derivative, but others aimed at a higher mark. Jong-chan Yun's *Sorum* (2001), for instance, is nominally a ghost story, treating of a haunted apartment building occupied by a novelist, a convenience store clerk, and a cabbie; however, the supernatural element serves mostly to amplify the movie's theme, which deals with the costs of the past. Until recently, I had seen just one Korean science fiction film, Seung-wook Moon's superb *Nabi* (*The Butterfly*) (2001). *Nabi* is reminiscent less of Korean cinema than of European arthouse films and exhibits a distinct Krzysztof Kieslowski (the *Three Colors* trilogy) influence — this is hardly surprising, since the director was a student of Kieslowski at the National Film Academy of Lodz. Set in a near-future dystopia (cities awash in acid rain, epidemics of lead poisoning), *Nabi* is essentially the story of Anna, a Korean woman tormented by an episode in her past, who has spent most of her adult life in Germany and returns to Korea to avail herself of the Oblivion Plague, an affliction that erases the memory of all those exposed to it. Since it's difficult to tell where the plague will strike next, plague "tourists" must hire guides to convey them to the site of the latest outbreak (they are always attended by the appearance of white butterflies; thus the film's name). Anna's guide is a young woman, seven months pregnant, named Yuki. Yuki's driver is a sullen, enigmatic man named K—. K— was raised in an orphanage and drives around all day with his baby picture taped to the dash of his cab, hoping one of his fares will recognize it and tell him about his family. Each time the three draw near an outbreak, something goes wrong, forcing Anna to spend an inordinate period of time in the company of this pair. Gradually she is drawn out of herself and becomes

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conflicted about her desire to experience oblivion.

As in all good science fiction, *Nabi* contains scenes — for instance, a group of tourists forced to give each other showers, washing off the acid rain — that persuade us by their mundaneity, their intimate specifics, that we are looking into the actual future and not some comic book fantasyland. Shot in digital video, rife with haunting imagery of polluted landscapes, caves filled with butterflies, and sights more surreal, *Nabi* has quite a different look from the sleek visuals of most Korean films, and, as mentioned, a different sensibility; but the recent *2009: Lost Memories* (2002) provides us a chance to examine science fiction in a more typical Korean filmic setting.

Memories is first and foremost an action picture, secondarily an alternate history. In 1909, An Chung-gun assassinated Japanese politician Ito Hirobumi, setting in motion the Korean Nationalist movement; in *Memories'* timeline, the assassination was thwarted and, consequently, Japan went on to win WWII with the assistance of the U.S.A. Korea suffered a fate similar to that visited upon Tibet by the Chinese and, in the year 2009, is populated almost entirely by Japanese. Seoul has become the third largest city in the Japanese empire, and Korean people and culture have been segregated in tightly controlled "Koreatowns"; but there is a newly vigorous nationalist movement known as the Hureisenjin who violently oppose the Japanese regime. As the film opens, the Hureisenjin stage a suicidal assault at the National Museum in order to steal an ancient Korean artifact known as the Lunar Soul, an action met with bloody resistance by a force of the JBI (Japan Bureau of Investigation) led by agents Masayuki Sakamoto (Dong-Kun Jang) and Shojiro Saiko (Tôru Nakamura). The Koreans are somewhat less fond of the Japanese than English are of the French across the channel, and *Memories* plays upon this dislike so as to appeal to a wide Korean audience. Saiko is Japanese, and, although he is Sakamoto's best friend, there is more than a hint of condescension about the relationship. At one point he tells Sakamoto, a Korean, "I don't think of you as Korean," intending this as a backhanded compliment. Sakamoto's father — also a cop — was shot by fellow officers for betraying them to the Hureisenjin, and, initially loyal to Japan, Sakamoto begins to experience doubts, partly due to

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visions he has of a woman wearing a pendant which is, coincidentally, shaped like the Lunar Soul. He discovers that the Lunar Soul and another artifact coveted by the Hureisenjin belong to the Inoue Corporation, founded by the Japanese man who thwarted the 1909 assassination attempt. The second artifact is a massive temple rock, which the corporation has excavated and is preparing to move to Japan. When Sakamoto persists in investigating the corporation, he is accused of harboring Hureisenjin sympathies, just like his father, and becomes a fugitive, pursued by his friend, Saiko. Hiding out in a Hureisenjin safe house, he learns that he is living in a false timeline. Long ago, the Inoue family discovered that the artifacts effected a means of time travel, and, living in Post-WWII Japan, the family sent one of their sons back in time to change history. As a result, the atomic bomb was dropped on Berlin, not Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and Japan is a great world power. It soon falls to Sakamoto to reroute history and free Korea from Japanese rule, and it falls to Saiko to follow him back to 1909 and stop him.

From this point on, about the three-quarter mark, the picture loses momentum; the ending becomes obvious and things resolve in a series of gun battles (upwards of 20,000 rounds of ammunition were expended during filming), bombast, and melodramatic confrontations redolent of Hong Kong movies. Still and all, *Memories* has its moments, especially when it details the subtle shifts in the relationship between Sakamoto and Saiko, back and forth, back and forth, illuminating delicate shades of racism, nationalism, and friendship. As an action picture in the Korean tradition, a blockbuster, it more than fills the bill, delivering artfully choreographed shoot-outs in tunnels, in warehouses, in woods, but action crowds out extrapolation and the elaborate conceit of time travel is not fully as developed as it might have been. By comparison to the typical American blockbuster, to a film such as *National Treasure*, a dumbed-down version of *The Amazing Race* that would likely seem great fun to a mentally challenged six-year-old if it were the first movie he had ever seen.... Well, there is no comparison. Not in terms of acting, directing, cinematography, and, probably, commissary cuisine. Why Hollywood can't compete with the Koreans or, for that matter, with the Khazakstanis while spending, on average, ten times the money is

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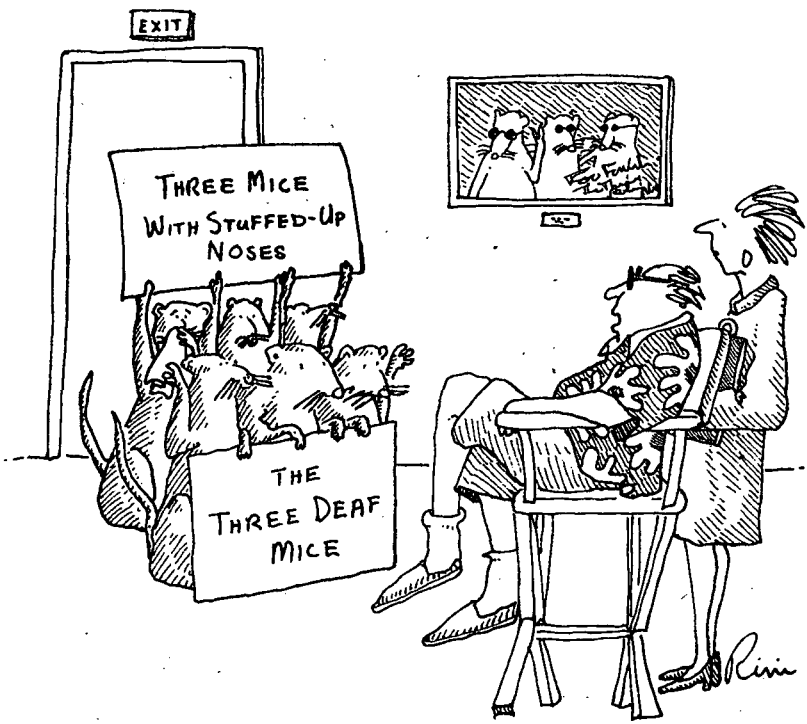
something to ponder. *Memories* is not going to end up on anybody's Top Ten list, but it's a serviceable science fiction thriller, an interesting take on alternate history, one with a different cultural viewpoint from those we are accustomed to seeing. By overplaying its melodramatic elements, it fails as an artful entertainment because of its desire to please a mass audience, albeit an audience that appears to demand better of their action fare than do we. You can be certain of one thing: the Koreans will eventually get it right. Sooner or later they will make the science fiction/action sub-genre uniquely their own, they will imbue it with style, depth, and excitement. And then there will be even more good films for Hollywood to remake.



"Every success brings the copycats out of the woodwork. It can get pretty Grimm."

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"One of my secret pleasures in this game of ours," Bob Thurston confesses, "is to open a publication with something of mine in it and read the header." With that pressure on us, our editorial team set to work and discovered that Robert Thurston played the maitre d' in I Still Dream of Jeannie *and Zack Miller in the 1926 film* Stacked Cards*; is a Research Assistant in the Botany Department in the University of Wyoming (Laramie); was born 25 Feb. 1713 in Stratham, Rockingham (the son of Mary Knight and Steven Thurston); is a local councillor for Netteswell ward in Essex; donated his papers (including correspondence with Cy McCormick and Nik Tesla) to Cornell University's Carl A. Kroch Library; and was a musicologist who died in 1971.*

The internet has certainly changed our lives. Which leads in nicely to this story, a look at the near future and the nature of change. Bob Thurston (our Bob Thurston) says that teaching a course in science fiction helped renew some forgotten ideas and feelings about the field that this story explores.

I.D.I.D.

By Robert Thurston

1.

EVEN THOUGH I WAS typically not packed, even though typically I'd mislaid my Civilian Travel Documents, even though Generalissimo Belford was barking at me to get on the stick, even though the chopper was waiting to take me off the island, I had to first say goodbye to my favorite aliens, Minnie and Zip Drive.

My Favorite Aliens — maybe I can turn this all into a TV sitcom and make some money for once in my damn life.

Because there had been some new mischief from my beloved charges, I had to be escorted around the island by one of our military contingent. This time I drew the one guy who refused to believe that my rejection of his attentions was honest and final. His name was Miguel Santiago, and he insisted on being called Miguel over Mike, although most of us called him Mike anyway.

"Howsabout it, Yesenia," he said. "Your barracks or mine?"

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A pickup line for the ages, I thought.

"I don't have barracks. I'm a civilian. I get a real room, Mike."

"Tell me the time and I'll bring flowers."

"Dump your wish list, soldier."

Santiago was a thin, dusky-skinned man with — against military regulations — a very thin moustache and elongated sideburns. I thought it was curious that he even wanted to look like a Mexican bandit. Next thing I knew, he'd be telling me he didn't need no stinking badges.

I found Minnie and Zip Drive near the northeast end of the island, moving their thick bodies in that graceful side-to-side sway and looking out to sea, toward the place where their spaceship lay submerged. *So idyllic,* I thought at the time in that dreadful ironic way I haven't been able to shake since I was a pretentious college student. But they did look like a photo shoot for a book on — I don't know — on Rousseau. *The Noble Savages from Outer Space.* Even then I cursed my damn self for thinking it. Hardly savages, and not so noble either. All the Loshaks painfully jabbed at any human who got too close to them. Since there were twenty-seven of them, that was a lot of pain, a lot of incidents, a bunch of Loshak-made scars for our peaceful military guardians. The latest incident, the one that had required my escort, had involved one of the Loshaks, Zip maybe, or the furiously mischievous Macro, roughly tripping up one of the sergeants, then sitting on him. When something like this happened, our noble warriors cursed us for putting so many restrictions on retaliation. Even in those times when regs had been ignored and a guard tried to nail a Loshak with a stun gun pellet, the target could spring out of the way like a kung fu specialist.

I gestured Santiago away and watched him amble toward the nearby tree where the soldiers assigned to guard Minnie and Zip Drive leaned against fragile-looking trees or sat on the rocky ground, chatting, probably concocting new Loshak jokes. The jokes were of the how does a Loshak pick its nose variety, and I hated them. The soldiers resented me because I was forever telling them that they were tools of the government whose flag they displayed in oversized shoulder patches. I suspect that the anonymous emails, routed through unknown sources, that accused me of alien-worshipping treason, came from them.

I momentarily wondered if Santiago really thought he could seduce

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me. If he touched me, I'd either cut his throat or set fire to his sideburns. After he had reached his compatriots, I could see from the way his body gestured back toward me that he was bitching about me. With relief, I returned my attention to my favorite aliens.

I gestured hello, a kind of jutting out of one elbow while shaking my head side to side. This was only one of the forty or so kinetic units of communication I'd been able to establish in my three years as the linguistics specialist on the island. In some ways the choreographic content of the communication made me feel like a chorus line refugee. I have never been sure whether the units represented units of the Loshaks' own language patterns or merely ones that they let us make up for the rudimentary communication they needed with us, a kind of joke they could share in scorning us. Minnie responded to my gesture while Zip Drive, characteristically, paid little attention. I looked at Minnie and thought again of how lousy we were with names. Their computer names, concocted by our computer geeks, didn't even make sense, any more than their calling the species Loshaks, a term whose origin I had never been able to track down. The word made them sound like some exiled Slavic family rather than aliens from space stranded on our planet. And the whole gender differentiation of the names was crap. There wasn't any indication, for example, that Minnie (short for Minibyte) was male or female or even one of several sexes we couldn't comprehend. Nobody had detected *any* sexual differentiation among the Loshaks. Once they gave them names, though, people started thinking in gender-related terms. Hell, even I called Minnie "old girl."

Minnie at that moment looked almost human as she fingered, with narrow long digits that seemed to wheel out from her hand, the silver identification tag that hung on a chain from her very thin neck. Almost all the Loshaks ignored the I.D. tags, but Minnie had a habit of fidgeting with hers.

Beneath a face that could be imagined as humanoid, although their heads actually looked like pitted and jagged rocks with nothing resembling a nose, there was a rounded ill-defined body with limbs that emerged and retracted according to need. In repose a Loshak looked pretty much like an unevenly shaped head atop a pillow that had lost its shape. We didn't have a clue about how many limbs an individual Loshak had. The

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guys had tried surreptitious electronic soans, but the Loshaks responded with their usual jamming, a mysterious effect that seemed to come more from their minds than any device we could detect.

Some of us thought that the shapes they took on the island were calculated, that somehow they had looked into our minds and discovered our irrational affection for household pets, and so had restructured themselves to look cuddly and less threatening. They did not completely scale down the threatening part, but it was easier to regard them through our teddy bear eyes.

Sometimes Loshaks emerged from their drafty government-issue Quonset huts carrying jerrybuilt contraptions and walked into the sea. When they descended to the ocean floor, our scanners showed that their bodies became elongated and thin. They glided in spite of the high pressure at that depth. If I had half their grace, I'd have been the damn ballerina my mom wanted me to be.

They took the contraptions to the spaceship, stayed awhile, then came back empty-handed. Most of us figured they were either storing the materials or using them to repair whatever was broken there, though how such assemblages of junk could be used for anything was baffling.

"What's new with you, old girl?" I asked Minnie. Her gravelly sound meant something like, "nothing much." One of her digits flicked at the I.D. tag, forcing it to fly upward to the level of her face.

"Something new for me, I'm afraid, Minnie. I'm going back stateside — to my country, that is."

Minnie stared at me, but Zip Drive whirled around and climbed a nearby tree. Zip was usually thought of as male because of his apparent bluff arrogance. He sat on a branch now and looked out to sea, pretending not to listen to Minnie and me. He had an almost pleasant expression on his face, which meant he was angry. Minnie looked irritable, a sign she was probably in a good mood.

"You know what we mean by *country*?"

Minnie gave an abrupt grunt. I suspected they always understood more than they cared to show through their grunted and growled vocabulary. Their language seemed to be full of nuance. My training in paralanguage helped me to combine hand, arm, and leg gestures with my version of Loshak sounds to achieve some interaction with them. Lately I had been

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able to sort out facial expressions and perceive their metalinguistic signals. I had done a paper on how their faces displayed emotions opposite to humans, anger for happiness, joy for rage. When the government's nondisclosure restrictions were rescinded, I planned to publish the paper and even write a book.

"Well, old girl, I don't really have a home in my country anymore, just relatives, friends, an ex-husband who explores caves and caverns and should remain in one forever — which would suit him, I think. See, people who control the money for this project are going to ask a lot of questions, and they're going to complain that, since results have been limited, the money's being wasted. That's how government works, Minnie. The money shows, the project goes. And I'll say, what the hell you gonna do with 'em anyway. Take away the money and you guys're still here and we retain enough human virtue not to do anything evil. I think. Anyway, our fearless leader seems to think I'd be the best representative to argue for the project. Says I've achieved so much with you guys. That is bullshit, of course. Belford wants me to go there because I'm attractive, in my dark and Latin way, and my hair has a natural wave that looks heroic for a representative of a team working with fearsome aliens in a desolate scientific environment. He wants me to lie, exaggerate the significance of our results, dazzle them with my charm, and — you know what? — I will because I love it here and I love you guys and I don't want this to end. Not ever."

As she listened, two of Minnie's arms propped her up on the hillside while one straight limb, not looking much like a leg, anchored her. Reminded me of a cheesecake pose in a cheap magazine. Damn, I said to myself, why did God give me the kind of mind that would imagine Minnie as an alien centerfold? Yet I could not help but wonder whether Loshaks had a leisure culture. Sometimes they picked up small rocks and carried them around. They hardly seemed conscious of them. After a while, though, they tossed them aside without noticing where they fell. Occasionally they sat back to back and made arrhythmic low noises. One team member thought this might be, at long last, Loshak sex. I didn't even like to speculate on Loshak sex. They say there's a species of something on Earth, dwelling in the sea, microscopic, that never has sex and is female. Maybe this is the way God wanted all species to be.

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Zip Drive eased down off the tree branch and spoke to Minnie in a voice that resembled a volcano rumbling, all the while appearing to smile. Minnie responded in a series of cadenced utterances that contained almost human inflection. I strained to hear something I could recognize, translate, interpret.

At something Minnie said Zip Drive took a couple of steps toward me. I looked to my right and saw Santiago begin to rush toward us. I waved him away. He backed off, seeming disappointed that he couldn't use his martial expertise. Not that he could have done much. Still, he was allowed to down an alien with a tranquilizer bullet — something that had not yet happened, but warriors can dream, I guess. I probably misjudged Santiago and, for that matter, all the soldiers who guarded us. It must be hard on troops to guard a peaceful government installation instead of being off with real soldiers who were using their martial expertise. I wished they *could* go away, travel to more adventurous locations, but even I had to admit that we were pretty vulnerable to attack on Belford's Island, should one of our foes suddenly decide we would make a sweet and meaningful target. *Pro patria mori*, I guess, though I had some reservations about that, too.

Zip Drive, using three limbs, turned and raced briskly to the side of the cliff, his nametag swinging wildly from side to side. At cliffside he came to an abrupt Roadrunner stop, to ponder the vastness of the sea.

It always surprised me, how fast Loshaks could move, and Zip was one of the speediest of them. Among the Loshaks there was one faster than Zip, a small compatriot incongruously named Broadband. Generally, Loshaks loped across the countryside on four legs, strolled on two or three. A single limb, which might emerge from anywhere on the rounded body, was used to pull vegetation out of a bowl and insert it into the lopsided orifice that served as a Loshak mouth. Lifting could engage as many as eight limbs, and they were strong as hell. With those eight limbs a Loshak could lift a truck and fling it several meters up a hillside — a practice that we had to persuade them to stop.

While I couldn't imagine our government abandoning the Loshaks, I still had unpleasant pictures of them scratching out an existence on the island. There was enough vegetation and the ocean would provide, but it wouldn't say much for humanity if we ignored them. And, anyway, the

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people who held the purse strings might get pretty nervous, not knowing what the Loshaks were up to on the island. These days we never knew what kind of prod anyone would use to start an uprising, so paranoid politicians all over the world worried about what kind of uprising the Loshaks might be capable of.

The other futures that might be found for them were unpleasant. Zoos, traveling exhibitions, their own TV shows, sitcoms — I didn't even want to think about any of it. My own worst paranoid nightmare was of the CIA conducting one of their covert operations to make the aliens disappear forever.

"So I don't know what they'll do. Not to worry, though. You guys are too important."

Zip Drive made a nervous wave toward the sea. I walked nearer to him and said, "What are you looking at, I wonder? Your ship? It is kind of wondrous, the sea, the waves, the horizon, even the boats that come up close to sneak a damn peek at you guys. Or maybe you're just like me, in a daze and zoning out. Hey, Zip, give me a clue. Speak to me suddenly in my own language, in a British accent, with wonderful insights into life. Won't? No, I couldn't either, I were you."

Minnie came to my side and Zip took a couple of steps toward us. He growled and I must admit the sound seemed menacing, even though it was friendly. Santiago edged forward and shouted, asking me if I needed any help. I told him don't be ridiculous and go somewhere and tell offensive jokes.

Eventually Minnie and Zip Drive strode gracefully away, each on four limbs. Later, they stood almost shyly at the edge of a line of scrawny trees and watched the chopper take off. Except for the TV coverage, that was the last I saw of them.

2.

I entered the taxicab with the foul taste of bureaucracy in my mouth. I had spent hours with a stiff government employee, an *Anglo* named Roger Froman. He was all Ivy League and nasal vowels. In a flat disinterested voice he asked me questions that clearly indicated his disapproval of the Belford's Island project. I could tell he thought the money was

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wasted and that his belief reflected the litany of the damn bureaucrats I was scheduled to go up against tomorrow — that there were too many people in our country needing help. Our money should be diverted to improving the lives of the poor, the downtrodden. If not the poor, then trillions for defense, trillions for preemptive attack. All the crap that fueled politicians at election time and gave bureaucrats excuses for their lies. No matter what logical arguments I offered, he just sighed, ignored me, and went on to the next prepared question he retrieved from papers in a folder he held on his lap.

Froman was a pudgy sort, chubby cheeks and a bureaucratic belly bulge. He looked like the villain-banker in an old movie serial, the kind I had watched with my father during the days we had the old faint-pictured TV set on its rickety stand. My father had rescued the set from a trash pile in the street. He liked to shout at the villains with some old-fashioned old-country curses that he refused to translate for me. I loved my father, *mi papá*. I missed him so much, even after seven years I could not think of him without immediate tears coming into my eyes.

Froman sat stiffly, his body twisted slightly away from me and his legs thrust straight out and crossed, just one of the guys at ease in the frat house. He reminded me of some of the characters in reruns of *The West Wing*, so sure of their whitebread notions, good-mouthing inclusion while holding on to power. In spite of Froman's apparent indifference to me, there were times when he stole quick glances my way — generally checking out my chest but occasionally sweeping across my face. I twisted my own body around, figuring the view might improve my chances of success with the committee. In the one time he relaxed, he put his head back against the back of his chair and asked me about my last views of Zip Drive.

"How did you even know he was sad to see you go?"

"Not sure exactly. Since he appeared kind of happy, I suppose he was actually sad to see me go."

"I'm surprised you even distinguish facial expressions."

"My job. When you've been around Loshaks long as I have, you see subtlety, hear nuance. Look, let's get back on track. Leave the Loshaks to me." The edge was definitely in my voice. I decided to try a gentler tack. "You seem like a nice guy, Froman, but we have to — "

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He became rigid and narrowed his eyes. His reaction was too quick, too nervous. "I'm married, very married," he said.

Well, that threw me. "That's nice, very nice," I said, "but what does it have to do with — "

He relaxed. "I forget. You've been away. I didn't want you to think I was coming on to you. The whole harassment process in our — "

"*Oye, vaquero.* I'm up on the latest in harassment. But I'm not going to call innocent talk harassment. Back on Belford's — well, forget that. We don't have much time for harassment suits there. I said to one of the guys, you're no John Wayne, why do you strut when you're around the other guys? He said — he was married, too — he didn't want to be seen as pussy-whipped."

"Yeah, I know. New term for that, too, after some protests. Only partly serious. Feline-dominated."

I couldn't help laughing. "You're kidding. Feline-dominated. Silly."

"Not so silly when a word like pussy — "

"Oh, stop. You don't have to lecture me on the liberation of us cowgirls. Don't tell me what I already know. God, all these euphemisms. All you have to do is create a new phrase and as long as it's got more syllables than the original it's all right."

For a moment that shut Froman up, and made me curse myself. Here I was, the expert on metalinguistics, tones, markers, the ins and outs of conversation, and I was about to lose it. Blow the interview. Why couldn't I be a good little bureaucrat, like I was supposed to be? I cursed Belford for shuffling me off the island, and for *this.*

Froman, after a long pause, said, "The Loshaks, do you consider them ugly? I mean, physically ugly? I'm sorry, I — "

I could feel my blood racing, but was determined to stay calm. "They're alien. NLU — not like us."

"I'm just curious what it's like to be around an alien species. You have to realize that a lot of people see them as, well, a bit frightening."

"How do you think the Loshaks'd look at us? I'm sure we're no prizes in their eyes. Maybe they have their own views on physical appearances. A lot depends on how much bulk you have in your ass, if you're a Loshak."

"You mean, a big, well, behind, is a sexy trait for them?"

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"Actually, I was joking."

Clutching the folder, his voice got all official. Inside, I was kicking my own, well, slightly overplump behind. Why didn't I just shut up? I was here to get money, not win a point on a middleman. I settled down after that, while he went on, asking the questions in an official monotone that I now found threatening. I did all right with the facts and figures, but couldn't shake the thought that I had screwed up big time. If I went back to the island Belford had so inelegantly named after himself without the funding, I could kiss good evaluation reports good-bye. Belford was nothing if not vindictive.

As I rode in the taxicab, I couldn't decide which was uglier, the urban sprawl sweeping by the car's windows or Belford's Island, with its rocky soil, scrawny trees, and ragged roads laid down by the Army construction team. Right then I longed for the desolation of Belford's.

Lost in my memories of the interview, I hadn't been aware that my driver, Valerie, was talking to me. Valerie Tenison, her name written in thick bold letters on a large identification tag hanging on the cab dashboard, was a slim attractive black woman in a high-priced brown business suit. I'd heard something on some cable TV program about this new breed of women cabdrivers, imitating the chatter of their male counterparts but classier in their elegant outfits and beauty shop hairdos. It was all right, but I kind of missed the guys in the turbans and their neat, broken-teethed smiles. You get the stereotype you deserve, maybe.

I took a stab at making conversation, hoping she wasn't aware that I had missed most of what she'd already said. "Men complain about women taking cabdriver jobs, Valerie?"

"Nope, doll." She spoke in what sounded like a put-on gravelly voice. "They did, we'd pound 'em into the pavement. Like they say, it's a New World and plenty of it, honey."

"Doll? Honey? When I left the States nobody, male or female, was calling anybody doll or honey."

"New world, new ways."

"But why *men's* endearments? Why doll?"

"Any macho bastard calls me honey or doll, I kick his balls right out of his body."

I didn't particularly care for the picture she summoned up, which

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involved both the male anatomy and a set of goalposts photographed from below.

"Wouldn't it be better if we dropped terms like doll altogether?"

"No, the bastards'd use 'em, so we defuse 'em. Anyway, you're a real doll. What's your name, you don't mind me asking?"

"Don't mind. Yesenia."

"Pretty name. Hispanic, right. Or do you say, Latina?"

"I don't use either word that often. I grew up in a family that denied ethnicity. My father wanted me to speak English all the time." Feeling my eyes tear up as usual when I talked about him, I turned away, looked at some very expensive homes peeking out from behind iron gates and sculpted trees. I looked back to find Valerie staring at me quizzically in the rearview mirror. A toy pair of high-heeled glittery pumps hung from the mirror, in the way dice used to hang. "I'm told I have an American accent when I do speak Spanish and that my grammar's awful."

"Well, your pops was way off-base. Latina, Hispanic, nowadays they're, like, medals of honor. Hey, you guys'll probably own the country pretty soon and the rest of us'll be trying to separate our *ola's* from our *olé's*. So, Hispanic doll, that's pretty good. Latina chick, even better, doll."

Although I smiled, there may have been an edge in my voice when I replied, "I wish you'd stop using that word."

"Hey, doll, nasty gender words're a man's game. Play it, but play it with balls."

3.

"Yesenia, *Tu te ves confundido, prima* — confused, frazzled," Maria said as she alighted from her own cab and joined me at the enormous Maximall entrance. "Anything wrong, hon?"

I was so glad to see Maria, the best cousin in the whole world, again. It had been two years since I'd last been stateside and we'd rushed a quick lunch together, each hurrying on to our next event. This time, we had vowed, we'd not let anything interfere with our afternoon together. I stared at her round face and saw, as if in a face beneath the mask of a slightly older woman, the girl who'd been my best playmate, her wide eyes welcoming any new experience, any new knowledge, any foolish thing

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that I said. The slight cynicism in those eyes now rattled me a bit, but I realized it might have come from the blue-tinted contacts in her eyes. I knew, from one of her e-mails to me, that she wore the contacts as a concession to her Irish husband, whom she loved beyond belief. So did I, in my cousinly way. Still, the eye color did not blend all that well with her light olive skin tones, even with her adept use of makeup. There were a few wrinkles in her face and a few more pounds on her already chubby body that I chose to ignore in favor of my image of the girl behind the mask.

We stood beneath a frieze of lions in a jungle. When I had arrived too early, I had stared at the lions for a while, not being able to comprehend the connection between lions and shopping. Some sort of fierce lunges at a bargain counter? Devouring new products? Honoring the eternal commercial success of *The Lion King*? Maybe it did make some sense. Lions scavenge. Shopping, scavenging — not much difference in the way each custom was practiced.

"Don't you start," I said, after we hugged.

"Start with what?"

"Hon. All this honey, doll kind of talk."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I call everybody I love hon."

I told Maria about my ride with Valerie.

"Oh, yeah," she said. "I heard about some of that, but it's not all that common. Originated in some group that calls itself the Ms-Alliance, something like that, or maybe with my literary turn of mind I'm making it up. Probably a small-time fad. Not for me. I still call my husband sweetface."

"Hope Valerie never hears that one. She might adopt it."

Maria gave me one of her looks that didn't need words to support it. I was overreacting. She was the cool, measured one, always had been. We went into a comfortable silence. A shiny red Porsche pulled up to the curb and let out passengers.

"Nice car," I commented. "I'm so used to mud-splattered dented jeeps where I come from."

"With a dirty jeep, you'd wind up somewhere in the outskirts of this parking lot."

"I don't understand."

"The Mall here. You have to earn your parking space. Do it two ways.

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Either spend a lot and they'll give you a computerized pass to let you park close and for free on an earned credit basis, no matter what a wreck your car is. The costliest vehicles get good spaces, too. It's like the rest of the world: status or good consumerism earns you the space and the free fee."

I laughed. "You're joking, Maria."

She shook her head. "Not a bit. You thought yuppeeism was dead? — *de ninguna manera*. It's alive and well and living in our souls. See that light blue boxlike thing in the center of the windshield?" She gestured toward the Porsche as it was beginning to pull away from the curb. "That governs where you are eligible to park. You don't have the right parking status, a detector or something in the space sends up a screech and mall cops materialize to give you a ticket. Well, not a ticket actually, but a fee to your account. Very embarrassing. But that's the system. Grew out of those windshield gizmos that let you cruise through toll sites — you know, E-Z Pass, Speedpass, whatever. Now that pass can even govern which roads you're allowed to take. Silly, huh? *Demente*. Glad I don't drive. C'mon, *prima*, let's shop to drop."

As we browsed, arm in arm, through the mall, I saw that many of the stores were grouped by theme in their own wings. There was a bridal wing, another of stores all devoted to children's clothes, and an especially long corridor lined with shoe stores. Along the way the ubiquitous military guards stood, usually with a hand flirting with their holsters. None of them were doing much, though we passed one rifling a shoulder bag of an obviously annoyed lady in a sari.

Overall, the Maximall was not exactly like the malls I remembered from my last stateside visit. In one wing there was a group of masculine-themed shops. One, in whose display windows were models of various types of weapons against a colorful flowery canvas backdrop, was called the Guns and Roses Boutique. The clothes were drab and designed for rough terrain. Many of them had large flag patches on their shoulders, along with other patches that were fake insignia heralding a bunch of recent battles.

"Oh-oh, *perdón*," Maria said. "Got lost. *Lo siento, prima*. This is the *machismo* strip. Emerged from the wars, when *machismo* became fashionable again. A bit of mall protest. Comes in reaction to some independent gutsy-woman kinds of stores that sprang up in many malls."

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Two men in cut-down tees stood in the doorway of a sports arcade with the ungainly title of BustYourBalls and leered at us, while making some remarks that I could not quite hear, though the tone was clear. I wondered if they were pretending to be construction workers. *Oh, God,* I said to myself, *there I go again with the stereotypes.*

Maria eagerly steered me away from the *machismo* strip. Fortunately, most of the shops we now stopped at did not proclaim social or political links, and few were reminders of global violence, so we enjoyed a couple of hours of what at least came close to old-fashioned shopping. I became more comfortable. At least The Gap and J. Jill had survived the disaster intact.

Tiring, we decided to eat and Maria suggested Unity, an international restaurant located nearby. As we were about to go into Unity, I felt a hand on my arm, and I turned to see my cabdriver, Valerie. She had changed into a gingham dress in red-check pattern that startled me.

"Yo, doll. Didn't expect to see me again, didja?"

"Well, no."

"I got to the cab stand, looked at all the people in their finery, said to myself, hey, hon, you need a break, time for a bit of shopping. Got this little number. You like?"

She did a dancer's twirl in the gingham dress, looking for all the world like a dancer from an old Broadway show like *Oklahoma.*

"It's quite nice. Didn't know that style was coming back."

"Retrofem's all it is. The next thing, they say. You going to the trough?"

As if to join us, Valerie picked up three large shopping bags.

"Um, yes. This is my cousin, Maria. Maria, Valerie. She drove me here."

"Hi, hon. Ooops, I see you two're havin' somethin' of a reunion. You don't need me at the table. I talk too much as it is. Maybe we can have a drink after."

"Join us," Maria said. "We've got lots of time to — "

"Nope, doll. I'm easy with it. You guys go and have a good lunch, and I'll check you later. *Hasta la* whatever."

Valerie strolled ahead of us into the restaurant.

"Interesting lady," Maria commented.

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"You bet, but can you explain the dress to me?"

"Not at all. I never even heard of retrofem. Doesn't seem like a good idea to me but, hell, all my life the same styles come around again. Whatever works, I guess."

"I noticed something during our walk. Most people are dressed normally, but some seem to proclaim affiliations — yet with contradictions, you know? Guys in biker dress carrying briefcases, demure women wearing outfits commemorating recent military encounters, T-shirts with so many endorsements they look like NASCAR coveralls, Valerie in her business suit cabbie outfit — for that matter, Valerie in gingham."

"Far as I know, it's a way of claiming a place in society. You ask me, I think it began way back when — you know, teens and college students in unattractive outfits that nobody sensible would wear except to suggest good solid surly rebellion, gays wearing duds that proclaimed their sexual identity while incidentally setting the styles for the fashion industry, all those sartorial variations blacks wore to separate themselves from whites and then had to change when whites adopted them. Somebody calls it an I.D.I.D. — meaning identity identification. You declare your identity through clothes, accessories, patches, words and pictures on shirts and skirts. Today's guys choose outfits that are extremes of *machismo*, confident women like to wear business suits. It's pretty mild, and you're only noticing the extremes. A lot of the outfits are quite stylish and mean *nada*. C'mon, let's eat."

Unity Restaurant was an intermingling of motifs from countries all over the world. I found it a bit too colorful and bright. My eyes ached from the glare, and I could not relax them until we were sitting in a booth whose overhanging awning cut off some of the light. A hostess in a sweatshirt and sweatpants — the international attire, I guess, or some mysterious form of I.D.I.D. — flung menus at us and took our drink order. Each of the menu's several pages seemed to feature a particular cuisine. After the waiter set down the drinks, I settled for a hamburger off the American specialty page, along with a Coke float. "Long time since I had real junk food," I explained apologetically. Maria chose *ropa vieja* along with rice and beans, commenting, "*Así soy yo, que puedo hacer*. Or as the *gringos* say, I am what I am. Like the Broadway song."

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I lifted my margarita as a silent toast. Maria followed suit with her gin and tonic, and we both took long sips at our drinks.

"How're things at the college?" I asked.

Maria shrugged. "Same-o, same-o. Maneuvering for tenure, promotion, recognition. A hundred committees trying to pretend that bureaucracy isn't driving the machine, pretending that our feeble anti-government protests have any effect, pretending we still have individualism because we can bitch within our territorial limits. I'm just happy to have the tenure. Forget about promotion. I'll be stuck in rank all my career, unpromoted and unpromotable, while my precious publish-or-perish colleagues bill and coo over the articles they've just published in their refereed journals about some obscure woman poet who wrote a couple of poems on cocktail napkins while dining with Sylvia Plath. Or they take a survey of some useless educationist idea, feed the results through a computer, and write about how the whole mess proves something that nobody could really care about, at least outside the old territorial limits. Not for me, *prima*. I just teach my classes, do whatever I have to, infect some less than eager young minds with a subversive thought or two. *Lo mismo, lo mismo.*"

"You could publish. What about those articles you were planning on García Márquez and — "

"I can't get myself to follow that yellow brick road. Besides, I don't like a lot of what's going on over in the publishing ballpark either. You know, I just reviewed a textbook, a new edition of a fine old text. But the original editor's died and so they've called in some young turks for the new edition. It's like — well, I don't know how to say it, just that it's the times and the way things are."

"Can't follow you."

"'Course you can't, *mi vida*. It's all academic crap, anyway. Everybody these days has to satisfy so many factions that it dilutes the material. Mostly it's gender, race, ethnicity. Got to make sure the kids get all the correct lines of thought. I just want to write what I think, not what somebody tells me I ought to think. So I teach and read and little else if I can help it."

"It's nice to be — " I said, but was interrupted by a man at the next table shouting at his waitress.

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"Wanna 'nother one of these! Now!" he said.

He was a big man. Broad shouldered and not yet going to fat. His blond hair was worn just a bit long, with tufts neatly touching the top of his ears. It was hard to judge from his scowling face, but I suspected he was generally considered handsome in a middle-aged, oozing-with-vitality way. A bit too whitebread for me, but not bad-looking.

"We have a limit on the number of drinks we can serve, sir," the waitress said.

Maria, who had glanced behind her at the scene, turned her head back and whispered, "Most places have a strict drink count these days."

"You mean there's a law against — "

"Not law — social pressure. All those organizations against drunken driving got their way, I guess. Started with designated drivers, then went to limits. *Demente.*"

The man grumbled something I could not hear, and the waitress said, "That may be, and I understand your irritation, but I am here to take your food order or provide your check for the drinks, whichever you prefer."

I suspected that the waitress's words represented a company response, to soothe the customary piques of its drinking customers. The waitress, a tall black woman with almost precise cornrow locks that swung easily when she moved her head, was pregnant and stood that way that pregnant women did, with her womb set forward and her back arched slightly backward. She held an order pad at the ready, and her pencil hand occasionally lowered to touch the side of her womb. Above her blouse pocket was a blue-bordered badge that said, "How may I serve you? My name is Wanda Vitale."

"Are you saying I'm drunk?" the man growled.

"Somewhat sobriety-challenged, I would say," Wanda replied.

"Hey, lady, don't be sarcastic, I'm — "

"Please don't call me 'lady,' sir."

"What do I call you then?"

She tapped the pencil's eraser on her name-badge. "How about my name? Wanda."

"Wanda, please, my good woman — is that all right? My good woman, I mean?"

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"I can live with it, sir."

"Wanda, my good woman, I would like your Chili and Rice from the Spic page of your menu."

Maria turned her head to look at the man, but he did not seem to notice her. Sitting three tables away, my cabbie Valerie shifted nervously in her chair, looking ready to challenge the man to a duel. Wanda quickly wrote down the order, pressing her pen hard against the paper, and started walking away from the table. Either she did not notice the man's next comments or was too intent on keeping her job to retaliate.

"Wanda, huh?" the man muttered loudly. "Wanda. Looks like that's her trouble. Somebody stuck his magic wand into Wanda real good."

Shrugging, the man maneuvered a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, fumbled one out, stuck it in his mouth and began to light it with a high thin flame from a shiny Zippo. A man in a dark suit with a red-bordered manager's badge on its lapel materialized beside him to remind him politely that this was a nonsmoker section and he was not allowed to light up here. The Beltway Maximall was an almost entirely non-smoking facility except in designated sections, the manager said. He offered the man a seat in the smoking section, which at the moment was crowded and had a half-hour waiting list. The man threw up his hands in disgust, closed the Zippo with a deft wrist-flick, then crumpled the cigarette, which he tossed into a nearby flowerpot. The manager watched the arc of the cigarette, an enigmatic expression on his face. He began to walk away.

"Tobacco police," the man muttered. The manager almost broke stride but continued on. "Butt Nazi," the man said in a louder voice. Noticing that I and Maria, among others, were watching him, he gave us a self-satisfied, sort of Jack Nicholson evil smile that made most of us turn back to our food. I continued to stare, but I turned away when his face relaxed and he smiled charmingly, then blew me a kiss followed by an almost graceful flourish of his hands.

"Assholes are forever," I said. "What were we saying?"

"I don't remember."

I could not keep from glancing over at the man. Relaxed, he did turn out to be handsome. The confidence with which he looked around the room suggested he was accustomed to having people pay attention to him,

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a possibility that was reinforced by his expensive clothes. What was he doing here, among exhausted shoppers and people who appeared tired out simply from the struggle of being middle class?

I could have settled into the middle class life. Tending a home, with my skills getting me a pretty fat paycheck, raising children who would conduct themselves correctly in this world, keeping up the domestic homefront like a loyal Andromache, living with a husband or lover whose life would be the exemplar of the best values, as mine would be too. *Yo pudiero ser ama de casa.* Been a perfect housewife, in fact. Something like Maria's life, I guess. I would probably be comfortable teaching college. It would not have been a bad life, this life I'd already rejected by going out in the field at low pay and, after my catastrophe of a marriage, rejecting most romantic offers.

Wanda returned with the man's order. She seemed to hover over the man as she deftly slid the plate in front of him. Her belly seemed to hover over the table even more than she did. She was certainly carrying high.

The man pointed toward her pregnancy and smiled. "What are you, one of those chicks who stay on the job until the last minute, when it's time to give birth?"

Valerie had her hands flat on the table in front of her. Her body clearly tense, she looked ready to spring up and spring forward, to fly over the table at him.

Wanda backed away a couple of steps and said, "Will that be all, sir?"

Her face was calm. I was impressed by her restraint. As she began to walk away, her customer narrowed his eyes and said: "Wanda, huh. Good sturdy name, Wanda. Good sturdy girl from the look of you. I can see you now — you'll drop that baby in the fields, wrap it up nice, and go back to pickin' the cotton."

Wanda whirled around, clearly ready to risk her job by taking a shot at a customer, but Valerie beat her to it. She was all over him, her arms flailing, her fists making hard contact as the man grunted in pain and offered little response. She induced some damage before a trio of military guards got to the table. After some subdued interrogation, two of them escorted the man out of the restaurant. The other grabbed Valerie's arm and began to lead her away. She resisted and he pulled at her roughly. Finally, she gave in and, after she had retrieved her three shopping bags,

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which she swung defiantly with her free arm, walked with him while unleashing a skein of insults. Wanda vanished into the kitchen.

"How adept of that man," Maria said suddenly. "His cotton-picking remark — it combined racism and sexism in a few words. Pity he did not read her nametag better; he could have reached a third level. Her last name was Italian."

As we left the restaurant, we saw Wanda leave ahead of us. She was in street clothes.

"Damn," I muttered and chased after her.

"I'm sorry," I said as I caught up to Wanda. "I saw what happened. They didn't fire you, did they?"

Wanda smiled. "No. Quite the contrary. They gave me the rest of my shift off, to cool down and, well, you know, the baby...."

"Oh. I'm sorry to intrude, but if they'd fired you I would have...."

"Yes, I can see that. If you don't mind...."

"Of course."

I watched Wanda walk away. She kept her body quite straight, especially for a woman so late in her pregnancy.

"Yesenia, you look a little shaken," Maria said as we resumed our mall walk.

"I am."

"Well, we can go somewhere and relax. What'd you like?"

I shrugged and looked toward an electronic store with several television sets in operation on a massive sidewall. I was about to look away when an image came on, of a Loshak sprinting on three legs across the barren Belford's Island terrain, gracefully. Even though the shot was from a helicopter, the Loshak's speed kept putting it momentarily off-camera and I sensed the cameraman struggling to keep up with it.

It had been a long while since any coverage at all of the Loshaks had taken place. After an initial flurry of stories about them, the media had quieted down. Other stories came along, buildings were blown up, fierce battles raged over foreign landscapes, and coverage of the Loshaks, hampered by government censorship of Loshak pictures, slowed down, then stopped. Taking Maria's arm, I led her into the store. We went directly to the wall of TVs. Several screens showed a newsman in a studio.

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He stared into the camera, intensity in his face, his eyes narrowed, his expression more serious than serious.

"Who's he?" I asked Maria.

"I don't know his name. Brad or Brent or something, one of those TV names."

Brad or Brent was saying that the rumors were true. Government research on the aliens was currently under congressional investigation. The flyby, the visual of which was repeated as the newscaster continued, was meant to obtain the kind of image that the government had denied news organizations, establishing that these aliens were roaming freely on Belford's Island. Brent or Brad introduced a commentator who had written a book with UFO in the title. The commentator said that the aliens "were among us," and we had a right to be told more about them. Angry, I cursed bitterly and loudly, causing a young man wearing a T-shirt that endorsed a necrophiliac type of rock band to turn and say to me: "Don't be scared, lady. It's no big deal. The aliens are probably fake. Another Orson Welles kind of deal. You know, like his Martian broadcast back in the Stone Age? People got real scared back then, ran around the Jersey countryside. I saw a docu on it recently. Last Halloween. This is another show like that. They want to scare us. Just like you're scared now. I read a lot about aliens in tabloids and stuff, and those aliens're nothing like this. Just a fake. Calm down."

Oddly, the young man's words did calm me. It seemed better for people not to believe in aliens.

As a panel of three more "experts," each with credentials worse than his, joined the UFO guy, I convinced Maria to cut the mall trip short and leave. Maria, seeing the pain in my face, readily agreed.

4.

The Loshak news story was picked up by a thousand other news networks and soon was on nearly every cable channel. By the time I testified at the Congressional hearing, it had become one of those major news stories that dominated conversations everywhere as it took up inordinate amounts of airtime and newspaper space.

At the hearing, the congressmen interrogating me seemed distracted

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and not very interested in funding matters. I felt oppressed by their disinterest, even as I reeled off strong facts and figures in favor of the project. But nothing I said caused much of a reaction in any of them. I wished my questioners would at least be hostile, the way congressional committee members were in the movies when the issue was on the line and the hero or heroine had to win them over. I lost hope as I came to fear that the cancellation of the scientific arm of the project was a done deal, had been even before the news stories. At least the questioning was held in a closed session, so I did not become part of the overall Loshak news blitz.

That evening the news coverage, which I watched on an aged TV in my hotel room, was replete with bias against the project. In interview after interview so-called experts had misgivings about the need for a costly study of a few aliens who'd crash-landed on Earth and, according to rumor, appeared to have no use for the humans who were studying them.

Xenophobia ran high in these broadcasts, and the few who spoke in favor of the project seemed to falter. Scientists offered clichés about the advancement of knowledge, yes, and there was an occasional good analysis of the situation by an objective observer, along with a surprising number of clergy saying why not be good Samaritans, but the main current of opinion went against the project. What good was such an expensive project if the only results of it were a few meager observations? Bring the aliens stateside, they said, let us take a look at them. One bright-eyed young woman, whose identity I did not catch, even suggested a traveling public exhibition, with admission and lectures, the profits of which could, along with foundation funds, expand the study of the Loshaks by teams from major universities. A leading film director expressed the wish to film the aliens up close and personal.

Things got worse when I switched to talk shows, especially those with phone-in commentaries from listeners who complained about the secrecy of the project and speculated that the Loshaks might contact other aliens and summon them to Earth for an invasion. This led to suggestions that the best way to solve the problem was an assault team invading the island and wiping out the aliens. I was almost amused by the visual inserts of scenes from a pair of old movies, *Battlefield Earth* and — of course — *War of the Worlds*, both the old one and the recent remake.

When they started with the Loshak jokes, I clicked the TV off and

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flung the remote onto a table. My nerves were on edge and I was breathing fast. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I tried to bring my emotions down. I was almost calm when the room's phone rang, a loud ring that made my whole body jump. I answered with a rude hello, but heard Maria say, "Hi, hon. You okay?"

"I'm on edge, that's what I am. I mean, I hate the idea of the Loshaks being transported to the mainland and becoming sideshow performers. And that guy who wants to observe them up close and personal, I — "

"I know. An idiot."

"What'd happen is that the Loshaks'd observe humanity up close and personal. That really embarrasses me. Whatever happens, I know what I'm gonna do."

"And that's?"

"I'm going to fight tooth and nail to become part of any study team that works with them here. Hell, I'll be a zookeeper if that's what happens."

"The way you've described these aliens to me, I doubt they'd submit to such a move."

"And then your gun-happy morons would have an excuse to mow them down. But you're right in one way. The Loshaks've never shown much curiosity about us or our world. They don't even pay any attention to TV broadcasts."

"Pretty smart cookies then?"

"I guess."

"Look, hon. Let it go. Get some rest. Want me to come by?"

"No, I'll be all right."

I put the phone down and turned on the TV, to see that the Loshak coverage was gone. It had been replaced by "breaking news," another terrorist attack in the Middle East. First I saw half a building that remained after a bomb explosion, then I saw pieces of the building separate and fall away, while the commentator spoke about the incident having occurred only moments ago. The camera zoomed in on the corpses of a woman and child. The woman had apparently been trying to protect the child, and only a tiny arm and leg could be seen peeking out from under the woman's body. It was at first difficult to tell whether these limbs connected to a child's body or were just pieces lying next to it.

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I looked away and listened to the commentary, which was about how the bomb had been carried by a teenage militant who had been blocked from entering the building by the security forces there. He had, as displayed in a blurry shot from an outside security camera, whirled away from the guards, run down the street pursued by them, and thrown himself into an outside stairwell, out of sight of any of the many cameras. There the bomb had exploded. A passing tourist had spotted the chase and managed to fumble her camera into position, catching the boy disappearing into the stairwell, then the subsequent explosion. The picture wavered from the force and we watched as the camera evidently was wrenched out of the tourist's grasp and plunged to the ground. The ground seemed to come up at the camera, like an aircraft crashing into the ground. The picture ended abruptly. After, the commentator noted how lucky they were that the tape had survived. I asked the TV set what luck could possibly be involved in any of this.

As they went on with the story, showing more and more pictures of horrendous devastation, the Loshak coverage continued in a red-background scrawl at the bottom of the screen.

I couldn't look at either and tried to bury my face in a pillow. The pillow smelled faintly of coffee, probably from spilled coffee, and it gagged me.

Switching off the TV, I tried to sleep but could not. It was late, but not too late to go down to the hotel bar and have a Turkey Club and a Sam Adams. I don't usually order by brand name, but Sam Adams was different — and patriotic to boot. As I waited for my food, I noticed that the three TVs suspended over the bar, each showing a different network's coverage, nevertheless had the same pictures of the terrorist attack, probably pool coverage, and all of them had a Loshak scrawl beneath, with the color of the background the only differing feature. Fortunately, the sound was low and I could angle my chair around so that I did not have to watch.

A waitress carefully placed a beer glass in front of me and poured the beer slowly into it. I admired the grace of her actions. I looked toward the waitress's shoulder to catch her name so I could thank her, but she — unlike Wanda — did not wear a nametag.

Sipping at the beer, I shut my eyes, grateful for the stillness.

"May I join you?"

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Oh God, just what I need, I thought. *Some guy with a passel of prepared pickup lines. Another your-barracks-or-mine idiot.* I looked up and saw the rude man from the mall restaurant, now apparently sober. *My God,* I thought, *of all the gin joints.... What is he doing here? It doesn't seem possible.* I looked over my shoulder, fully expecting to see Valerie suddenly spring up from the woodwork, maybe sitting with the man with the rock band T-shirt from the electronic store at the mall. Fortunately, there was no other familiar face in the room. I thought Belford's Island was small, but the way people kept walking back into my life here on the mainland was spooky.

On the man's lapel was one of those stick-on name tags that said, "*Hi, my name is,*" but there was no name written into the space below the phrase. He held a bottle of seltzer water in one hand, and a glass full of ice cubes with the other. I quickly searched my mind for the kind of withering insult the man deserved, but found I had no energy for it.

"I don't require any company just now, thank you very much," I finally said.

But he sat down anyway, then poured some of the seltzer water into the glass. I wondered if he planned to spritz himself as part of the come-on.

"I won't stay long. It's just me that needs company anyway. All right?"

Inadvertently I saw a close up of Zip Drive on the middle TV screen. The other two channels were still showing bomb wreckage. The pain of looking at Zip Drive distracted me from the man.

"Do what you want. I don't have to pay attention to you, after all."

He laughed. "The kind of riposte I deserve, I guess."

I was surprised by his use of the word riposte, and I looked more intently at him. I did not like to admit it, but he *was* good looking. And there was intelligence in his eyes, which were dark blue and clear.

"I'm not coming on to you, believe me."

Irritated, I sighed. "Why don't you guys just stop with the protesting too much and just come on to women honestly, in the good old-fashioned male jerkoff way?"

"You got it. You are the prettiest girl I've seen in a dog's age."

"And you're the ugliest dog I've seen in a man's age."

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He laughed. "Good one," he said. "Cute."

"Like I'm cute?"

He gave me a most sincere stare. "More than cute, hon."

"Only my family gets to call me hon."

He waved his hands defensively. "Okay, okay, I'll back off. I just want to talk, really. No coming on. Or perhaps I'm coming on to your intelligence, not your physicality."

"That's such — hell, never mind."

"No. What were you going to say? I'm all for banter in this language-starved world of ours."

"Language-starved? Just the phrase makes me shudder. I was just going to respond to your come-on in a come-on response way, a comebacker, a zinger, and I realize by doing so I'm just playing your game. I don't want your game. I don't do games. I just want to be alone."

"Oh, a Garbo."

I nearly put my head down on the table in frustration. "A Garbo? That's so ridiculous. Do you realize that nobody minds if wanting to be alone draws some inane comment about Garbo? What if Clark Gable had wanted to be alone? Would it be called doing a Gable? I don't think so. He would have been admired for his calm and silent stoicism. There is something faintly ridiculous about the Garbo thing, as if a woman is never meant to be alone. Well, I want to be alone, buster."

The man lapsed into silence and sipped at his seltzer water. All the TV sets were showing coverage of the terrorist story, but one evidently was doing a background bio of the boy who'd carried the bomb. In a photograph he had sad, almost questioning eyes. In his face was hope. Why hope?

Finally the man said: "I'm sorry, then. Really. I understand femtalk. I really do."

In watching the bar TVs, I had forgotten what we had been talking about, and it took me a moment to reorient myself.

"Femtalk? Forget it. You don't get it, and you never will, *tonto*."

"What are you talkin'? I'm like the Lone Ranger's sidekick?"

"No, *tonto* is Spanish for dumb."

"The Lone Ranger's pal was dumb? Tonto was dumb? Now that sounds politically incorrect if I ever heard politically incorrect."

"I was insulting *you*, not a cultural icon."

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"Okay. *Tonto*, eh? Pretty fiery lady, aren't you? Latina, right?"

I sighed. "I'll let you say I'm of Hispanic stock. Heritage."

"A real hot tamale, I can see."

"Go away, *payaso*."

"What does that word mean?"

"Clown."

Another silence. The man looked especially introspective. His eyes were sad. "I'm a sorry son of a bitch," he said, his voice quieter. I could not tell whether the sincerity was real. "I'll grant that. I don't know what drives me, what makes me say what I do. I was a reporter for a while, graduate in journalism from George Washington U. Eventually I got a crime beat — the small crap while the big-namers got to cover the glamour cases. Had to spend a lot of time in the streets, picked up a lot of the slang, most of it out of date now. The beat gave me a shot at a column where I wrote up street talk for our suburban readers. I liked that for a while, but eventually I got out of it all, gave it up. I made a lot of money on stocks by pestering our business reporters to explain the market to me. As a result, having a job no longer mattered. But I do care about language, and I don't like what we're doing to it."

"You're the one who said femtalk."

"I know, I know."

"You were really a journalist? That's not part of your come-on? I find it hard to believe."

"Well, I was."

"And I suppose then you're married and monogamous. I mean, to go along with all the other contradictions in your behavior."

"Married, yes. Not happily. Couldn't be monogamous if the survival of our species depended on it."

"Well, it doesn't, and I won't."

"I can see that."

"So you might want to do your nocturnal prowling elsewhere. Hon."

"No, I like you. This is nice."

I was about to tell him I had observed his boorish behavior in the restaurant earlier when I became aware that all three screens above the bar were flashing a news bulletin sign. The same old film of the Loshak flyby quickly followed it. Shouting to the bartender to turn the bloody sound up, I got up and rushed to the bar. The man followed me. At the bar he took

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a position right next to me. He got a little too close, and the smell of mouthwash seemed to waft off his clothing, as if he used it instead of cologne. I slid a few inches down the bar.

A newsman announced in an excited voice that the Loshaks had left Belford's Island. They had all walked into the ocean. An hour later a volcanolike eruption of water had risen high in the air a few kilometers from Belford's Island. The commentator stopped to listen to someone else through an earpiece.

"We have pictures," he said. "Thrilling pictures. Roll the videotape."

First we saw the eruption of water in the wide expanse of ocean. Little by little, in that slow motion that begins a launch, the Loshak ship arose from the high waves, picked up speed, and headed upward at a speed higher than any human spacecraft had recorded. The commentator came back on and said they would imminently have footage from a satellite showing the Loshak ship sailing at an even faster speed away from Earth and on its way out of the solar system.

"Looked like something out of George Lucas," the bartender said. "Probably what it is. Some people say there are no aliens."

I only glanced at the bartender, then turned my attention to the screen as the final stage of the Loshak departure was shown. It was over so quickly. They were gone so quickly. Damn.

Beside me, the man cupped his hands to his mouth and announced in a loud voice: "Atttention! The Loshaks have left the planet. The Loshaks have left the planet." A few of the other patrons laughed but without much enthusiasm.

I sat on a barstool for a long while, watching the footage repeated and then talked about by a phalanx of solemn experts. One even called the Loshak departure God's answer, but to what question I wasn't sure.

The bomb incident was, for the moment, relegated to the crawl. A flashing sign on the corner announced that the U.S. president would, within an hour, be commenting on the day's events in a White House speech. In a sidebar there was a report that a beloved celebrity had died and a special tribute to her would be broadcast tomorrow night.

I thought of my last day on Belford's Island, what had turned out to be my last moments with Minnie and Zip Drive. Tears came into my eyes. I tried to rub them away but they began to fall harder, to run out between my fingers.

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The man put his hand on my shoulder. "That's charming," he said. "Crying over the creatures. I couldn't do it, but — "

"I know you couldn't. Shut up."

I strode back to the table angrily. He followed. There was some anger in his voice as he said: "Sentimental. Just like a woman."

I grabbed the beer bottle off the table. For a moment I wanted to break it and ram the jagged edges into the man's handsome face. But even in rage I could not do that. I did throw it, though, and it bounced off his forehead. He reeled back in pain.

"Just like a honey," I said. "Just like a doll, just like a chick. Excuse me, I'm going to leave now."

"Hey, I'm sorry," he said, while fiercely rubbing his forehead at the area where the bottle had bounced off. "Give me a break. You're upset. You need someone to talk to."

"Screw you."

"I'll behave, honest."

I spoke quietly, suppressing rage. "Look, in some circles you're probably a nice guy. Intelligent. I could even like you. In some circles. But we're dislocated or something, all of us. We're identity-challenged. Hemmed in by the words we use. I'm happy the Loshaks have left. Now they do not have to study us, try to figure out how we can be so reasonable, so generous, so filled with violence and desire for war. We use only right words — it's like the E-Z pass to social belonging. We have race identities, ethnic identities, gender identities, job identities — everything but a human identity. The Loshaks probably saw that. I think that's what I saw in their eyes without understanding it."

"You know the Loshaks?"

"I came here yesterday from Belford's Island, and I'm going back there tomorrow for — I don't know what. To pick up the pieces."

The man's eyes narrowed with interest. He dropped his hand from his forehead and gestured toward me. "Now I know I want to know you. I've been looking for a book to write. We have to talk. There's a book in this, a — "

"For you, maybe, not for me. Hey, I got to go, doll."

I went to the bar and slapped the bill for my meal down. A corner of the bill landed in a wet spot and a spot of moisture began to grow there. I moved the bill and put money down on top of it, along with what I hoped

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was a generous tip for the graceful waitress. On the left TV screen there was now a split screen, a repeat of the Loshak ship coming out of the water on one side, and soldiers pulling apart wreckage, apparently searching for bodies on the other.

The man came up beside me. He spoke gently.

"Stay. We need to talk."

I considered an elbow slam into his stomach. I considered turning around and giving him a Three Stooges two-fingered poke in both eyes. I considered working up enough spit to cover his face. Instead, I turned around and stared intently, saying: "Look, sir, I am sure you are capable of a fine intelligent conversation, laced with street-smart insights and all that crap. I am, in fact, sure there's a human being in you, in there somewhere. But I'll see you."

"Stay."

"No, thanks."

"But — "

"Forget it. I got to go pick the cotton, man."

I didn't look back as I left the bar.

Coming Attractions

Next month we'll see the return of the foremost freelance discriminator of the city of Olkney in the penultimate age of Old Earth. Yes, Henghis Hapthorn returns, in what might be his most involving tale yet, that of "The Gist Hunter."

Also returning next month are Charles Coleman Finlay's adventuring duo of Kuikin and Vertir, last seen in "After the Gaud Chrysalis." They'll have to contend with a variety of foes next month, the fiercest of which is perhaps the imp. Or perhaps they have more to fear from their new friends.

We've got plenty more stories lined up for the months ahead, including new tales by David Gerrold, Bruce McAllister, Mary Rosenblum, and a new Peter S. Beagle novella a few months down the road. You can subscribe now at *www.fsfmag.com* and you'll be sure to get your money's worth in great reading this year.

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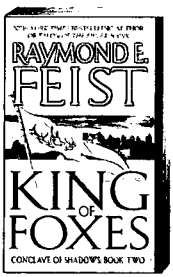

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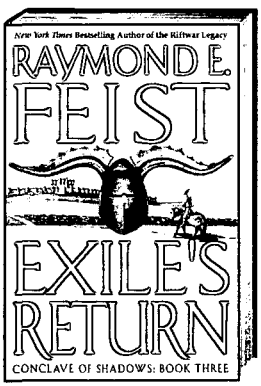

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